A THEATRE OF BLACK WOMEN:
CONSTRUCTIONS OF BLACK FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY
IN THE DRAMATIC TEXTS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS IN THE 1920s AND 1970s

Nike M Imoru

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of a three-and-a-half year old girl who showed me that strategy is the optimum form of survival.

A Theatre of Black Women:

Constructions of Black Female Subjectivity

in the Dramatic Texts of African-American Women

Playwrights in the 1920s and 1970s.

Nike M Imoru

This thesis seeks to foreground and analyse black female subjectivity by recourse to dramatic texts by twentieth-century African-American women playwrights, African-American historical narratives, and black and post-structuralist feminist theories.

An attempt is made at the outset to re-assess African-American historico-political conditions in the 1920s and 1960s in order to explore the relationship between black political activism and cultural production. Although African-American social upheavals of the 1960s have come to be characterised as "revolutionary", it is necessary to critically re-evaluate the organisational hierarchy and ideological impetus that underpinned the black civil rights organisations, in order to interrogate the intractable relationship between mainstream white institutions and black civil rights organisations. Within this critical framework, the absence of African-American women from historical narratives is particularly marked, despite the fact that black women were also working at the interstices between cultural production and political activism.

In contrast, historical narratives of the 1920s and the Harlem renaissance situate the contributions of African-American women alongside those of African-American men. The dramatic works of Georgia Douglas Johnson and Mary Burrill, two prominent figures of the Harlem renaissance, demonstrate black women's efforts to articulate and dramatise the prevailing conditions of racism and sexism at a time when African-Americans' lives continued to be blighted by Jim Crowism. These "maverick" women playwrights are a part of a continuum of black women who seek to challenge mainstream and white patriarchal hegemony.

The second half of the thesis attempts to create a link between the plays of the "mother playwrights" and contemporary black women writers who continue the tradition of fusing cultural production and political activism. It's Morning by Shirley Graham and Beloved by Toni Morrison both foreground infanticide as an act of counter-insurgency, under white supremacist ideology. This raises the issue of the ways in which the contemporary black female writer perceives black female subjectivity. On this subject, black feminist scholars write of the multifarious nature of black female subjectivity and as a consequence of this, black feminist epistemologies seek to reflect the multiple dilemmas inherent in black female materiality within white mainstream society. Ntozake Shange's For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf is a seminal example of a black feminist dramatic text (choreopoem) that offers representations of black female subjectivity as multiple, and in process.

The final chapter offers a detailed analysis of Shange's choreopoem and this leads me to define the black female subject (referred to as the Coloured body after Shange's "colored girls"/women) as a "shifting subject", (in contradistinction to a unitary subjecthood), that embodies radical possibilities for change.

In conclusion, attempts are made to examine the way in which I myself attempt to resist homologisation into a mainstream and white academic institution, offering my own background, as theatre academic as material(ity) for the hypothesis of the "shifting subject".

INTRODUCTION

CHARTING DISPARATE TERRITORIES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AND BLACK FEMALE SUBJECTIVITIES

Houston A Baker makes two crucial comments in his introduction to The Journey Back[1] (1980) that address the intellectual concerns of this thesis. He observes that "[s]carcely more than a decade ago, a number of black spokesmen - including literary critics - assumed it was our turn to speak" and secondly that "[t]he present is an age of theory" (xi). These comments speak directly to the first and second half of the thesis respectively. There is however a characteristic oversight on Baker's part, one that I seek to bring sharply into focus, namely, the absence or misrepresentation of black women.

In her introduction to Ain't I A Woman,[2] bell hooks (*sic*) challenges assertions such as Baker's which refer to "black spokesmen", and explicitly ignore, not so much black spokeswomen, but black women *per se*. hooks would argue that Baker's use of black already denotes black men only (the term spokesmen only serves to compound his view that black men represent black intellectual thought and consequently black experience), since "[w]hen black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men* and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white *women* ... No other group ... has so had their identity socialised out of existence as have black women" (7).

This thesis is an attempt by a black woman to bring into view identities and subjectivities that have been "socialised out of existence". There is growing concern from black feminist scholars, who question the absence of black women's intellectual and experiential discourses in the academy. Barbara Omolade (1990) believes that

> [h]istory books ... about Black women have yet to capture, touch or transmit their historical experiences and visions with the truth and depth of the poetry, songs, and novels written by Black women about Black women. The Black woman is certainly a historical being, but where is her history? Where are the books for high school and college reading that

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1 Houston A Baker Jr, The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) (xi).

2 bell hooks, Ain't I A Woman (London: Pluto Press, 1982) (7). Future page references to this text will follow the citation. In keeping with hooks' refusal to capitalise the first letters of her pseudonymic fore- and surnames, all subsequent references will employ lower-case letters. She discusses her reasons for this in "to gloria, who is she: on using a pseudonym", in Talking Back: Thinking Feminist Thinking Black (Massachusetts: South End Press, 1989) 160-167.

> tell her story? Where are the lengthy discussion about her political philosophy, her religious theology, her sociological methods? How did she become so central, yet so invisible; so outspoken, yet so silenced? [3]

bell hooks (1992) poses similar questions with regard to "our feminist books on mothering, on sexuality, on feminist film criticism".[4] In partial response to black feminist scholars who reiterate these absences, the thesis is a determined effort to fuse disparate black and white historical, feminist, literary, dramatic and cultural discourses discourses that might allow black female subjectivities to emerge "as a group separate and distinct from black men [and] as a present part of the larger group 'women' in this culture" (hooks, Ain't I A Woman 7). Although black women writers are increasingly gaining recognition for their contribution to literary and feminist arenas; such as Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, and Alice Walker, who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for her novel The Color Purple, their emergence onto the wider cultural and intellectual sphere has been slow relative to the emergence of intellectuals and literary figures who are not black and female. Comparatively, then, black women's intellectual thought and cultural production is noticeably under-represented in both Britain and the United States. While this glaring inconsistency becomes increasingly obvious the further back in time one looks, the most significant and curious absence seems to be that of black women playwrights.

My involvement in theatre (practice), both academically and professionally, became the catalyst for an attempt to discover whether black women have been as involved in dramatic production as they have in literary production, because on the surface there appeared to be only two recognised and acclaimed black women playwrights in the United States, Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange, and none in Britain. While primary and secondary sources on black women's writing - particularly African-American women novelists and poets - dating as far back as 1760[5] are more readily available, it is extremely difficult to discover published and/or anthologised plays by black women. An inevitable consequence of this is the further absence of critical appraisals of plays by black women, other than Hansberry and very occasionally Shange.

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3 Barbara Omolade, "The Silence and the Song: Toward a Black Woman's History Through a Language of Her Own", in Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance (eds.) Joanne M Braxton and Andree N McLauglin (London: Serpents Tail, 1990) 282-295 (283). Future page references to this essay will follow the citation.

4 bell hooks "Revolutionary Black Women", in Black Looks: Race and Representation (London: Turnaround, 1992) 41-60 (59). Future page references to this essay will follow the citation.

5 In 1760 a seven-year old young African female slave was sold to the Wheatley family. She was named Phillis Wheatley and she became "the first Black human being to be published in America ... the second female to be published in America", according to June Jordan in "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in American or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley", in Moving Towards Home: Political Essays (London: Virago, 1989) 161-172 (163).

The focus on African-American writing and history was an inevitable consequence of frustrated and failed attempts to locate a continuous body of history, feminist praxis, cultural theories and most importantly, dramatic texts on and/or by British-based black women. Additionally, the absence of on-going black theatre debates and black theatre research in Britain, relative to the United States, led to an increasing reliance on black American sources. As British-based black female novelist and academic Jackie Roy points out "[m]ost of the theorisation of black literature is coming out of America and is not widely available here."[6]

The shift from black British intellectual terrain to American black intellectual terrain resulted, perhaps inevitably, in continuous references to the history of African-American slavery and the subjugation of African descendants to white supremacist domination. However, it very quickly became clear that there were a number of competing versions of African-American history. This is reflected in the form and structure of the thesis which attempts to chart, not a *middle passage* through the competing elements (in this instance one that would seek to present a balanced coherent and logically structured set of historical events), but rather a journey that struggles to detail a specifically black and female perception of black female cultural production: one contingent upon African-American women both during and after slavery. Thus a central and recurring concern of the thesis is to examine cultural production relative to historical narratives, with the understanding that just as the novel or the dramatic text (fiction) can offer reconstructions of history so that fiction reframes history, so the process of historical investigation also involves a process of fictionalisation. As white cultural historian Hayden White (1978) argues,

> We choose our past in the same way that we choose our future. The historical past therefore is like our various personal pasts, at best *a myth*, justifying our gamble on a specific future, and at worst *a lie*, a retrospective realisation of what we have in fact become through our choices (emphases added).[7]

Given hooks' observation that black women are socialised out of existence, and conscious of White's lie of the historical narrative, the project takes on another two-fold dimension, that of re-assessing the nature, or more specifically the narrative of (the) lies that have erased black women (with notable exceptions) from the printed pages of African-American history, in order to re-construct other sets of historical narrative; ones that align and view black women more directly in relation to black cultural production

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6 Jackie Roy, "Black Women Writing and Reading", in Black Women's Writing (ed.) Gina Wisker (London: Macmillan, 1993) 43-54 (47). Future page references to this essay will follow the citation.

7 Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978) (39). White's notion of "the lie" might be viewed as somewhat judgmental. However I employ the term more to denote a myth than to effect judgements. Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

and an Afrocentric historical world view. In this way narratives of history and cultural forms of production can begin to work in tandem with each other as opposed to being in opposition to each other. Furthermore, rather than deleting myself as a black woman from the text of this thesis (in the light of hooks' assertion), and adopting the role of "chaste [historian] ... intend[ing] to represent 'things as they are'" (White 2), in the second half of the thesis I deliberately inscribe myself into the debate and arguments, in order to reflect the many ways that the process of research led me to examine my position as a black female academic and actor in predominantly white and male intellectual and cultural establishments. In so doing, I aim deliberately to foreground the ways in which my processes of reading and writing across a range of academic and cultural discourses become a self-reflexive activity in which I am ever conscious of displacing one set of *lies* in order to reframe and privilege other or Other's sets of truths.

Accepting that there was *de jure* an institution of slavery in America, between the seventeenth century and the mid to late nineteenth-century, and that this institution was an economically viable structure of oppression that "explicitly denied slaves the grounds of being" (Baker 30), I began by following two strands of inquiry. The first was concerned to examine alternative ways of reading and understanding a collection of early to mid twentieth century plays by Black women playwrights, anthologised by Kathy Perkins.[8] The second strand of inquiry examined the nature of African-American political and cultural movements that became landmarks in (black) American history. This resulted in two chapters which variously seek to highlight the ways in which African-American men and women in the first half of the twentieth century either inadvertently colluded with white patriarchal forces of oppression and/or defined themselves in opposition to those structures. Both chapters, however, attempt through primary and secondary sources to define quite specifically the *lies* that inform historical discourse *vis-à-vis* African-Americans. The chapters also attempt to examine the ways that locating and defining the *lies* resulted (in the 1920s and 1960s) in political and cultural attempts to defy the structures of oppression by recourse to modes of black cultural production, in order to challenge white hegemonic cultural and political domination.

Chapter One begins by drawing comparisons between the construction of the historical narrative and the constructions of the dramatic narrative in order to demonstrate the contingent nature of encoding historical events in any particular sequence. White describes this narrative construction of historical texts as "emplotting". His term is employed in the chapter because of its similarity in sense to the way in

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8 See Kathy Perkins, Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950 (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989). Future page references to this text will follow the citation. Additionally, all but one of the plays under consideration in the thesis form a part of Perkins' anthology. Consequently, all page references will be based on this volume.

which the playwright plots the events of a dramatic narrative.[9] Rather than examining the events that occurred in the United States in the 1920s and the 1960s respectively, it seemed more important to discuss the eras non-chronologically since the phases are distinct from one another. White argues that "each period of history has its own beliefs and values inapplicable to any other, so that nothing can be understood independently of its historical context" (22). This was taken on board and developed in order to effect an historicist reading of the civil rights organisations of the latter period under discussion.

The analysis of civil rights *organisations*, which are different from the civil rights *movement* attempts to examine the ideological premise underpinning black civil rights organisations of the period. While on the one hand African-American historical narratives acknowledge that black political activism of the 1960s resulted in a black revolution, it seems important to interrogate the nature of the revolution *per se*. It could be argued that the presence of white establishment figures, who were integrated at the highest levels of the organisational hierarchy, denied the possibility of a socio-political revolution, because as white authority figures and given the historical relationship between blacks and whites, they came to represent, symbolically if not literally, forms of control that de-radicalised the organisations they controlled. Consequently, the effect of white establishment membership resulted in a liberal tenor being secured in the organisation. In tandem with this process of de-radicalisation, an attempt is made to examine the ways in which (African-American) pro-desegregationists were effectively colluding with white paternalism and consequently with patriarchal structures of oppression. One could argue that by electing whites into executive positions within the civil rights organisations, pro-desegregationists also elected to collude with white mainstream ideology, an allegiance which black nationalists found untenable. Malcolm X, for example, the black nationalist figure *par excellence* viewed black and white collusion as a *lie*, one which sought to subsume the anger of African-Americans and consequently the potential for a black social revolution that according to him should be effected by "any means necessary".[10]

Arguably, diverting angry African-Americans from *any means* by which to achieve racial equality, towards more liberal means, such as those aimed towards peaceful protest, is the prime concern of liberal ideology.

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9 And the way too in which the lighting designer or operator plots the lights during technical rehearsals in the theatre.

10 See Malcolm X By Any Means Necessary (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1992). This volume details Malcolm X's 1964 speeches, including his inaugural speech at the founding rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity in June 1964. Malcolm X maintained: "we have formed an organization known as the Organization of Afro-American Unity ... to fight whoever gets in our way, to bring about the complete independence of people of African descent here in the Western Hemisphere, and first here in the United States, and bring about the freedom of these people by any means necessary" (37).

In order to understand the interlocking nature of political and/or social institutions, it seems important to examine more closely the ideological framework that underpins those same institutions. While Althusser's concept of ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus (hereafter ISA) is by no means unproblematic - "Althusserianism is based on a polemical technique which can only be described as intellectual terrorism" - (Clarke 73) it is employed in the chapter in order to examine closely the way that institutions might be viewed as essentially different parts of the same (socio-ideological) machinery, so that, in the final analysis, political institutions such as the civil rights organisations might be seen as ideologically interlinked or indebted to a mainstream and patriarchal ideology. Viewed in this way, it seems important to question the concessions that might have been made when predominantly male-centred civil rights organisations challenged white mainstream domination. It could be argued that one of the concessions resulted in African-American *female* political activism and/or cultural production being ignored. As Michele Wallace points out "[p]recious few black women were allowed to do anything important in the Black Movement ... [the African-American woman] was not allowed to participate in political planning".[11] Thus, Wallace argues that one of the concessions and subsequent consequences of civil rights organisations allying themselves to mainstream white patriarchy resulted in black women being rendered invisible (169). This leads to questioning the degree to which civil rights organisation were *reactionary*, as opposed to revolutionary and also brings into view the problem involved in attempting to define, characterise and analyse African-American black political action within and through a dominant white discourse and ideology.

This problem is also evident when an attempt is made to analyse African-American cultural production. One could argue that African-American male-centred political activism in the 1960s resulted in the exclusion of African-American women from the political stage. However this explanation only speaks to gender conflicts. It does not address the two way process of racial *and* gender oppression that African-American women experience and challenge through forms of (black female) cultural production. For this reason, the second half of Chapter One attempts to examine the nature of the African-American cultural revolution that occurred in the 1920s. This era is characterised in African-American history by the Harlem renaissance. However, bearing in mind the tropological nature of emplotting dates and events for the sake of securing historical truths, it is possible to problematise the view that the Harlem renaissance began and was concluded within a certain time span, by citing the diverse and contradictory views of black scholars. This serves to continue the theme of working against intellectually verified truths about African-American history by African-

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11 Michele Wallace, Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman 3rd ed. (1978; London: Verso Press, 1990) (162-169). Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

American men. Black historian, Harold Cruse for example, seeks to explicate the reasons for the *failure* of the Harlem movement on the grounds that it failed to implement policies that were culturally, politically and economically contingent upon one another. He highlights the failure of the Harlem renaissance because in his view it prioritised racial integration over and above African-American cultural political and economic policies. According to Cruse's historical narrative, the failure of the 1920s African-American renaissance had a direct bearing on black cultural production thereafter, because future generations of African-Americans had no synthesised politico-cultural and politico-economic framework, through and within which they could assess and debate the value of African-American cultural production in a mainstream context. Thus, for Cruse, the integrationist zeal of the movement, which he argues failed to produce a black playwright of any repute, resulted in a movement that was ineffectual and, in terms of the history of African-American cultural production, insignificant.

It is possible however to challenge the internal inconsistencies in Cruse's causal arguments, and his "mode of emplott[ing]" the Harlem renaissance. Crucially, the fundamental problem in Cruse's argument arises because he continues to view the movement as made up of a racially, socially and economically homogenous group that should have been moving towards the same socio-cultural and politico-economical goals. What Cruse fails to acknowledge is the fact that the Harlem renaissance, like the various civil rights organisations, demonstrated differences as well as similarities amongst its ranks. Thus, for example, the Southern Leadership Conference (SCLC) which was led by Dr Martin Luther King Jr, adopted non-violent means of protest for racial reforms. King and the SCLC differed from, for example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). (which continues to be the oldest civil rights organisation for African-Americans in the United States). By the time the SCLC was established in 1955 the NAACP had become more conservative in its aims to desegregate American society and sought to challenge American racism through the federal and Supreme courts.

In the same way, the Harlem renaissance was not a cohesive group of African-American intellectuals who sought merely to integrate themselves into mainstream white society. There were differences of an intellectual, artistic and aesthetic nature between, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, two significant progenitors of the Harlem renaissance. Cruse overlooks the significant events and people of the Harlem renaissance in order to relate an historical narrative that is atypically monolithic in its construction and characteristically chauvinistic. Thus he ignores or down-plays the contributions of African-American women playwrights, novelists, poets, actresses, singers, whose presence and contribution to the movement is lasting evidence of the way in which African-American women were at the forefront of the cultural

renaissance. This contribution is acknowledged and applauded by James Weldon Johnson in Black Manhattan.[12]

Given the problem of black patriarchy colluding with white mainstream patriarchy (as cited above), it is perhaps no coincidence that Cruse, an historian writing in the 1960s, should not only fail to acknowledge the different contributions made by African-American women of the 1920s, he also seeks to institute and replicate for the Harlem movement a hierarchical framework that would result in *a* leader - in the way that the (white) Greenwich Village movement had a leader (patroness) in Mabel Dodge (a woman incidentally that Cruse much admires despite his approbation of her racism), *a* single cultural philosophy along with playwrights to convey *the* message of and/or for African-American people. This perhaps, reinforces the idea that there is a direct correlation between the African-American historians of the 1960s and their narratives of African-American history. The *disappearance* of women from the centre stage of political action and black cultural production in the 1960s is strongly reflected in the work of post-World War Two black male scholars who, in writing about other periods of African-American history, categorically ignore the contributions of African-American women. Conversely black scholars writing at a time before male dominated black nationalist organisations sought to incorporate white figureheads into their ranks,[13] were more prepared to acknowledge the fact that African-American women as well as men worked at the interstices between black political activism and black cultural production.

In the light of the first chapter, and the attempt to re-plot historical narratives with regard to African-American political activism and cultural production, Chapter Two is an attempt to foreground the contributions made by African-American women playwrights during the 1920s. It seems important, to examine from an historical perspective black women's cultural and political contributions in this landmark era. Cruse's belief that the renaissance failed to produce a black playwright of any distinction, can be challenged if one questions his criteria for a *black playwright of distinction*. While he fails to consider African-American women in a general sense, it is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest that he does not conceive of black female playwrights worthy of any status. Yet the plays by black women playwrights of the

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12 James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan: The American Negro His History and Literature (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1930). Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

13 The situation is perhaps not as simple as I have outlined here. The NAACP started as a racially mixed movement. But then the NAACP did not exhibit the kind of black nationalist fervour that was evident during the 1960s. It needs to be remembered that the NAACP was established fifty to sixty years before, for example, the SCLC. At the beginning of the twentieth century the agenda for racial equality was markedly different to the agenda for achieving racial equality in the 1960s. I discuss the NAACP relative to the younger civil rights organisations in the first section of Chapter One.

1920s are crucial for an understanding of the way in which African-American women challenged white patriarchal domination. Furthermore, their plays foreground a tradition, not only of African-American women playwrights, but perhaps more importantly, a tradition of black women articulating black *and* female political concerns in the dramatic form. These "women mavericks" (Brown-Guillory, Their Place on Stage 4) attempt to expose the *lies* of mainstream white patriarchy in order to offer representations of black women that are in line with African-American female versions of history. These plays then, become crucial in the light of critical appraisals and anthologies of twentieth-century America drama that rarely, if ever, include plays by black dramatists. The African-American women playwrights offer alternative versions of black (female) history from an African-American female perspective. As such, their dramatic texts might be viewed as historical narratives which are vital to the continuing and developing body of work on black women's history, and other disciplines or cultural forms in which black women's contributions are either viewed as minimal or insignificant. These plays by African-American women of the 1920s which attempt to challenge interlocking racist and sexist assumptions, also demonstrate the way in which history and the resultant historical narratives are constructed according to a process that relies on displacing one set of "facts" in order to replace and re-constitute or re-plot a narrative that speaks to a different reader or spectator in this case, the black (female) spectator/reader.

Notwithstanding the need to establish and acknowledge a tradition of African-American women playwrights, it seems important not to homogenise the women as a group who struggled in adversity in order to be recognised. While none of the women became "established" playwrights, neither were they forced to live under materially impoverished circumstances. A significant part of Chapter Two details the privileged position of the women, many of whom were related by social ties that spanned the Harlem renaissance, to the early day of the civil rights organisation, the NAACP, and to the curious phenomenon known as the "colored aristocracy". According to Willard B. Gatewood,[14] African-American aristocrats were an elite group in black society whose existence proved categorically that African-Americans as a social class are as stratified as white society. In fact, the leading figures of the renaissance, W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, conceptualised, independently of one another, an educated black elite who would make it their responsibility to *uplift the race* through recourse to African-American forms of cultural production and history. This was a course of positive (race) action that became known as race uplift.

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14 Willard B Gatewood Aristocrats of Color (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). (7) All future page references to this volume will follow the citation.

Locke's "thinking Negro" or "New Negro" (The New Negro: An Interpretation[15] was also the title given to a collection of essays by renaissance writers), addressed African-American politico-cultural concerns. Du Bois who was always of the view that an aristocratic class would uplift African-Americans from the dearth of racial inequality, also coined an equivalent concept, the Talented Tenth. The Talented Tenth were educated and/or professional African-Americans whose duty, according to Du Bois, was to lead the black community out of servility and serfdom into racial awareness and racial pride, which would culminate in black emancipation. This view of education as an important tool for the liberation of African-Americans characterised the Harlem movement and those connected with it. Howard University, for example, was a seminal black university which developed a dramatic department of some repute under the aegis of Locke and Professor T Montgomery. A number of the women playwrights attended Howard University, highlighting once more the need to acknowledge a tradition of African-American renaissance women who formed a contingency of African-American intellectuals, committed to challenging and subverting mainstream racist and sexist ideology.

Four plays by African-American women playwrights: Georgia Douglas Johnson and Mary Burrill, form the basis of discussion in the second half of Chapter Two. The analysis focuses on the ways in which the playwrights offer alternative versions of African-American history via dramatic writing. The central themes of miscegenation and lynching have been highlighted because of the ways in which the black female body and the black male body were systematically violated as a means of economic gain and coercion, respectively. The dramas which seek to subvert prevailing notions of black womanhood as negatively constructed by white supremacist ideology, aim to re-plot narratives that focus on the way that black women were sexually exploited by white men not only during slavery, but in the period after, a period known as the Reconstruction era. For Angela Davis, however, the notion of reconstruction *per se* after the civil war was more a myth than a reality.[16] African-American women and men continued to be subject to racial persecution after the abolition of slavery (which coincided with the end of the civil war).

Acknowledging this myth, African-American playwrights attempt to (re)construct representations of black women that draw upon a history of domination and a legacy of sexual abuse and denigration, Blue Eyed Black Boy (1930s0 and Blue-Blood (1926) privilege black women's voices, experiences and historical narratives. Both historico-dramatic narratives offer a version of African-American history that

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15 Alain Locke (ed.) The New Negro: An Interpretation (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925).

16 See Angela Y Davis, Women Race and Class (London: The Women's Press, 1982). Davis writes of "the betrayal of Reconstruction" (186). All future page references to this text will follow the citation.

seeks to challenge white historical narratives which viewed the black woman as the Hottentot Venus,[17] as a fully sexualised being whether child or adult and therefore always sexually exploitable.

In an examination of the lynching of black men, which gained (white) public credence *after* the abolition of slavery, Johnson's A Sunday Morning in the South (1925) and Mary Burrill's Aftermath (1919) reveal the daily turmoil of lives "blighted" by racism. (Brown-Guillory, Their Place on Stage 2). This does not, however, result in representations of black women or men that are founded on self-pity or defeat. Instead the plays variously highlight the ways that African-Americans challenged the system of racial oppression by recourse to subversive strategies and/or direct confrontation.[18] Either way, the playwrights engage in a two-way process that involves challenging mythical racist perceptions of African-American men and women, while simultaneously offering counter-representations of African-American reality. While these playwrights seek to subvert at the level of the thematic, formally and stylistically the plays adopt conventional dramatic forms through which to convey their challenge to white hegemonic rule. As Perkins point out in the introduction to the anthology, these are propaganda or folk play (3). Their intention is to situate African-Americans, particularly women, in a more positive light and to represent them in ways that challenge racist and sexist representation of black womanhood, rather than to subvert white cultural forms of production.

Baker's assertion, quoted at the beginning of this introduction, that "the present is an age of theory", characterises the two chapters in the second half of the thesis. Chapters Three and Four shift the inquiry from a historical-cultural perspective to a theoretical-cultural perspective, in order to examine the writing of contemporary African-American women dramatic/literary writers.

This half of the thesis is structurally and thematically rendered problematic as I (the "*objective*" theatre academic) begin to acknowledge the "I" (the black woman subjective self) who is attempting a two-fold project. This project involves, simultaneously attempting to analyse the historical and contemporary dramatic texts of black female playwrights, while seeking to establish a feminist theoretical framework for black feminist epistemologies, within socio-intellectual structures that are pre-eminently white and male. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins articulates a similar dilemma, but adds that

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17 See Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature" in "Race, Writing, and Difference (ed.) Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 223-262 (225). All future page references to this volume will follow the citation.

18 Aftermath examines more closely the ideological premise of lynching and for this reason I discuss the nature of that particular ideology within a white dominant patriarchy and the threat of black manhood to that ideology.

> writing ... has convinced me of the need to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity in producing scholarship. Initially I found the movement between my training as "objective" social scientist and my daily experiences as an African-American women jarring. But reconciling what we have been trained to see as opposites, a reconciliation signaled by my inserting myself in the text by using 'I', 'we', and 'our' instead of the more distancing terms ... was freeing for me.[19]

There are however other concerns, which go beyond those of Hill Collins', and which became apparent as I attempted to structure an intellectual and (therefore) objective debate that attempts to centralise black *and* female *and* dramatic concerns.

Firstly, as a black woman, there is the necessity and importance of naming, defining and contextualising a post-industrial, post-Enlightenment rationality in order to locate the specific ways in which black women are defined and positioned within contemporary white mainstream ideology. However, and this raises the second point, there is an absence of a critical vocabulary that addresses black women's theatre and subjectivity *per se*. Thirdly, (and as a consequence of this), it seems logical to argue for the need to construct black feminist epistemologies from black historical narratives. The problem here, however, is that the demands of black feminists to privilege experience as a vital component of black feminist theory, conflicts with the requirements of a thesis and the "manner" of academic discourses both of which require a non-subjective rationale. There is a further complication. It arises from a need to understand whether, or how, it is possible to fuse white feminist post-structuralist theories of subjectivity with black feminist theories given that black female subjectivity has been racially and sexually denigrated by white mainstream and patriarchal ideology.

Rather than attempt to elide these contradictions that arose in the process of research, the thesis foregrounds them as on-going and as problematic. The aim here is not so much to re-plot historical narratives, but rather to knit, or marry apparently disparate discourses. They might only be perceived as disparate however, in the light of a mainstream ideology that stresses coherency, linearity, rationality, objectivity, and so on. For this reason, Chapters Three and Four variously refer to the inevitable problems of writing within ideological parameters that refuse contradictions. Within such parameters, contradictions read as unresolvable, and therefore a non-rational form of logic; while the problematic reads as unresolvable and therefore an unsatisfactory mode of reasoning.

Given Denise Riley's observation in 'Am I That Name' (1990)[20] that a *post-Enlightenment* rationality has resulted in the imposition of false societal categorisation

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19 Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (New York: Routledge, 1990) (xiv). Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

20 Denise Riley, 'Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History (London: Macmillan, 1988). All future page references to this volume will follow the citation.

such as "woman" and "society", for the sake of the theoretical half of the thesis, and as a working model, contemporary society and ideology are defined as *liberal-humanist* structures. Here the intention is not only to highlight and challenge white mainstream society, but to interrogate those structures and discourses, black and/or white, women and/or men that might be seen to foreclose the possibility of articulating multiple differences and multiple dilemmas within black female subjectivity. This might be viewed as a continuation of the tradition foregrounded by the 1920 "women [playwright] mavericks", whose intention was to expose the negative and false representations of African-American women by interrogating the *lies* of white supremacist ideology.

Chapter Three begins by questioning and destabilising fixed notion of social and political categorisation. I argue through recourse to post-structuralism and post-modernist feminists that to homogenise "women" into a single category serves to exclude those female experiences that do not conform to white feminist notions of female oppression and reality. The intention here is to loosen the parameters of materialist feminism, and what I, (as a black woman), perceive as monolithic principles that dictate equally monolithic perceptions of the category of woman and feminism. I do so in order to find ways of addressing the central theme of infanticide in the dramatic text It's Morning (1940), by Shirley Graham, and Toni Morrison's novel Beloved [21]

Having examined in Chapter Two an historical dimension of black women's cultural production as a form of resistance to dominant white representations of black women, it became necessary to investigate how similar forms of resistance would manifest themselves in contemporary women's writing. There were three dominant recurrences. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, contemporary African-American women have tended to use fiction as opposed to the dramatic form in order to articulate contemporary black feminist concerns. Secondly, as well as challenging, racist and demeaning representations of black women, contemporary African-American feminist scholars also attempt to subvert traditional linguistic and formal conventions. In this way, the form, is as crucial to an understanding of the chosen view of historical representations, as the sequence of events therein. Finally, black female subjectivity and the black female body have themselves generated a discourse which has given rise to ways of revising black women's history not solely contingent upon a history of demeaning physical circumstances, but also one in which the black female body is itself, along with black female subjectivity, a form of resistance.

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21 Toni Morrison, Beloved (London: Picador, 1987). All future references to this text will follow the citation.

For this reason Beloved is included as the only novel in a predominantly theatre based thesis. Firstly because the thesis is also concerned with the ways that black women writers seek to manipulate language in order to resist white dramatic and literary conventions. While the plays examined in Chapter Two look to subvert at the level of the thematic, they nonetheless employ traditional dramatic and naturalistic forms of representation. In terms of the black women that they write about they are concerned to project the respectability, heroism and, to a degree, the conformity of the protagonists in their plays as much as, if not more than, their radical and subversive potential. Contemporary black women writers, in this instance Toni Morrison, and in Chapter Four, Ntozake Shange, while continuing to assert black cultural resistance and rebellion, also write about the black female body as a site of struggle and this is of crucial importance to the ways in which black female subjectivity is variously constructed and defined by black and white women and men, both historically and contemporaneously. In keeping with the tradition of black feminist inquiry, the intention is to interrogate liberal humanist (mainstream) cultural *and* gender.[22] Thus Chapter Three concentrates on the black female subject as a unique subject who *shifts* between and within the ideological structures of a post-Enlightenment (or liberal humanist) framework, so that she is ever in the position of experiencing herself as multiple and shifting as opposed to unitary and fixed as a subject. The question is whether this position can be politically and personally coherent within mainstream ideology or whether such a postulation does no more than to reinforce the black female subject as a marginalised and powerless instance.

Contemporary black feminist scholars who aim to combine feminist (theoretical) inquiry and practical, artistic or literary concerns, also advocate the inclusion of the self in the academic text. The experience of being black and female is itself seen as a form of experience that can be mediated for specifically black feminist concerns. As a black British-born Nigerian woman, the intention is to enquire to what degree, or how, the black female subject in a Western liberal-humanist democracy, can effect radical political changes in her life, given that "the conditions that allow an oppositional culture to emerge ... [can] limit its vision so that it still borrows from and relies upon the culture of oppression" (Kelly xxiv).

An analysis of both texts leads to an attempt in the final section of the chapter to fuse the discourse on the black female body engendered in Beloved and It's Morning with black and white feminist theories which reject liberal-humanist assumptions of unitary stable subjectivity, and which look instead to articulate a female subjectivity predicated on positionality and the subject in process. Consequently the argument

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22 Michele Wallace acknowledges that thanks to the work of June Jordan, Adrienne Rich, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde and bell hooks, "an investigation of race oppression and women's oppression is no longer as problematic as it was in the 1960s and 1970s" (xviii).

works against the notion of a black female subjectivity that is unified and stable, viewing this as one of the myths of liberal-humanism, to argue in conclusion for black female subjectivity that is shifting and indeterminate and black feminism that is cognizant of this shifting /indeterminate subjectivity.

The final chapter, posits For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf (hereafter For Colored Girls) (1975)[23] by Ntozake Shange as a seminal black feminist text that explores the notion of the shifting subject via the Coloured body - that is Shange's seven women who are each costumed in a single coloured dress. Addressing Hill Collins' notion of the outsider-within, the analysis proceeds with an examination of the way in which the shifting/dancing Coloured body locates a geographical region that simultaneously translates as a metaphor for an arena beyond the confines of liberal-humanist ideology. In this arena, one sees that the women are able to shift between subjectivities as the narratives demand, thereby militating against subjective specificity. The Coloured bodies refuse the "utter lie" of Eurocentric art and by implication Eurocentric conventions of literary and dramatic forms, in order to proffer cultural forms and black female political exigencies that resist and/or exceed the limitations of liberal-humanist ideology.[24]

In For Colored Girls, the body is foregrounded as the dominant discourse along with narratives that are enacted without recourse to psychological and/or naturalistic essences. In Shange's theatre of Coloured bodies, the subjects re-define and re-fashion themselves according to the dramatic narrative each *comes into*. The Coloured body is therefore shifting from moment to moment as opposed to adopting a fixed set of psychological features which make it distinguishable from the next Coloured body. Consequently, rather than securing identities and meaning, the Coloured bodies undergo a process of *destruction* in order to destabilise meaning and fixed notions of black female subjectivity and black female experience.

This approach to analysing the choreopoem attempts to draw parallels between the performance of the Coloured bodies on stage and the realities of black women in wider society. According to Shange, black female subjectivity is a "metaphysical dilemma" (45). Rather than viewing this negatively as an intractable contradiction, one could argue for viewing this dilemma as an inevitable consequence of being non-white and female in a liberal-humanist framework. The result is not a will to submission and the status of victim; rather, it results in a subjectivity that is always contingent and

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23 Ntozake Shange For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf (New York: Macmillan, 1975). All future page references to the choreopoem will stem from this edition and will follow the citation.

24 The "utter lie" is Shange's own response to the idea of European art as the criterion against which all cultural forms are measured, see Claudia Tate (ed.) Black Women Writers at Work (Harpenden, Herts: Oldcastle Books, 1985) 164. All future page references to this text will follow the citation.

provisional, engaged in processes of negotiation in order that blackness and femaleness can become self-determining.

The need of the Coloured bodies to be self-determining is exemplified by the ways in which both body and text (materiality and textuality), challenge mainstream dominant perceptions of so-called reality and experience and in this sense For Colored Girls is not dissimilar to the plays of the 1920s, in which the female protagonists also challenge the white supremacist notions of black women and black women's "reality". Subsequently, it is possible to see the ways in which African-American women playwrights employ the dramatic form in order to bring into view alternative representations of black women and black female reality, representations that work to oppose mainstream and negatively constructed representations of black female subjectivity. They therefore challenge the spectator to reconsider racist *and* sexist assumptions that have resulted in negative images of black women being perpetuated.

Shange offers the challenge to black men, as well as white women and men and in doing so, demonstrates the problematic choices that black women must make within a liberal-humanist ideology that demands singular, static and non-contradictory processes of negotiation. This results in black women having to identify an allegiance to either the black community - in which case there is the possibility of having to face, (without challenging), the "void of misogynous lies" (Tate 162). Conversely they can opt to identify with the feminist struggle against those lies, in which case there is the danger of their differences, which are fundamental to blackness and femaleness, being masked.

Given the dilemma that black women are faced with when forced to make allegiances to race *or* gender concerns, it is perhaps not surprising that For Colored Girls was subject to adverse criticism from a coterie of black male scholars. Black men who saw For Colored Girls when it was first performed on Broadway in the mid-seventies felt that they had been betrayed by black women who had *sold out* to white feminism. Inevitably there are problems for black women who do not opt for *allegiance* to a specific racial, *or* gender category, but who opt instead to shift between categorisations, in order not to be homologised into groups that do not address the differences and realities that arise out of a black and female subjectivity.

The chapter is concerned to analyse For Colored Girls and relate the central formal and thematic concerns to black feminist theories as espoused by black feminist scholars along with my own interpretations which are predicated variously on post-structuralist feminist theories of subjectivity in process, black feminist theories, and my own interpretation of the shifting subject. The most striking and recurring motif seems

to be the way in which racial/cultural and gender discourses have collided and proved to be, on occasions, incompatible. It is this dilemma that the text seeks to demonstrate.

While it is perhaps obvious that marks of racial and cultural differences will inevitably result in schisms, in terms of the individual's relationship to mainstream ideology, it is not always so apparent that consciously or otherwise, a mental agreement, or decision needs to be made, in order to take on board the perilous task of proliferating and/or shifting the self in order to be *both* female *and* black. One might argue that it becomes a pre-requisite for the black female subject, and by implication, a black feminist epistemology. Hill Collins' *both/and* stance begins to illustrate a similar theoretical positions. It is also echoed by Omolade who urges "social scientists to use simultaneity, multiple consciousness, and diverse approaches in their work" (290).

Although adopting a shifting subject position does not and cannot guarantee emancipation from material forms of oppression, and is more likely as Calvin Hernton indicates,[25] to result in becoming socially ostracised, it might still be viewed as a potentially liberating and empowering stance because it enables the black woman to name and speak to the multiple "realities" of her life and history as she perceives and lives them. Arguably, this is infinitely more agreeable than responding to sets of false and negatively constructed realities which serve to silence and oppress her further.

The shifting subjectivities of the Coloured women in For Colored Girls need to be distinguished however from taking on different roles. Adopting different social roles is one of the necessities of mainstream ideology which allows the individual to be either/or (not both/and), in order to satisfy the demands of a given social situation. Thus the black male critics of For Colored Girls demanded that Shange align herself to the black struggle as opposed to "pay lip-service to the women's movement" (Hernton 200). In contrast to this, the shifting subject recognises the futility of such a posture, because of the damage it could cause to the self both spiritually and in terms of ones own set of political and ethical position.

Shange's Coloured bodies also foreground the *lie* of liberal humanism; and the guiding principle of For Colored Girls, in the light of the central thematic concern of the metaphysical dilemma is to expose those lies. The women refuse to masquerade, or dance uncritically to the tune of black solidarity and the black power struggle, understanding that to do so would be to submerge and smother "the black girls song ...

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25 See Calvin Hernton, "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers", in Wild Women in the Whirlwind 195-213.

her rhythms/caring/ struggle/ hard times/her song of life" (4) under the deluge of a brotherhood that has been slow to recognise a black sisterhood.[26]

The concept of the outsider-within might be perceived as a playful abstraction with little if any recourse to black female reality beyond Shange's choreopoem. Furthermore, criticism might be levelled at the thesis because of the disparate strands of historical, dramatic and feminist theoretical inquiry that intersect at the point of black female subjectivity but do not form discrete discourses or chapters. Instead, historical inquiry has resulted in socio-cultural analyses of historical narratives, while analyses of dramatic texts by black women playwrights of the 1920s has produced "feminist" interpretations of the central thematic concerns. The shift to the study of black women's contemporary dramatic writing and feminist theories has resulted in the inclusion of contemporary black women's fiction as well, and, an examination of the black female subject *per se*, has resulted in an *uneasy*, or unsettling conjunction of subjective black female self and "objective" theatre academic. In other words, the thesis does not concretise around its central concern, that is, black women, rather it proliferates. This proliferation of discourses and disciplines reflects both the process of research and the subject under consideration. An investigation of African-American dramatic writing of the 1920s necessitates a parallel investigation of black women's history, but given the relative absence of black women as subjects of historical narratives in general, it is perhaps inevitable that this will lead to an investigation that attempts to account for this absence by recourse to black and white feminist theories.

No attempt is made to "conclude" the thesis. This would seem to necessitate the imposition of a "formal" closing device on subject matter that works against such formality and closure. Instead, an attempt is made to examine the hypothesis of the outsider-within in conjunction with my role as a female and black theatre academic within the institution of higher education.

I begin with a re-assessment of my documenting for The Magdalena Project in 1990 and move to critically interrogating the problems I encountered teaching black women's dramatic writing to groups of exclusively white students; a dramatic writing that is contingent upon a history of racial subjugation and domination of blacks by whites.

The discussion of my work with the Magdalena Project is crucial to the second half of the thesis for a number of reasons.[27] Firstly, the Magdalena Project marked the

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26 Hernton in his critique of black males response to black women's writing claims that "[w]hen black male writers write of the brotherhood of black men in the struggle for manhood, this is viewed as manly and fitting. But when women write about the sisterhood of black women, black men brand them as 'feminist bitches'" (202).

27 It is necessary to point out, however, that it is not *only* the Project that I seek to discuss but my own role as a black woman within the Project and the ways in which *I* began to perceive and

beginning of an attempt to critically evaluate theatre practice by recourse to feminist and critical theories of subjectivity. Secondly, with hindsight, it is possible to argue for the way in which my role as an observer was the beginning of a process that involved by *choosing* to *position* myself in ways *other* to the dominant group. Thirdly, it is an attempt to concretise further the theory of black female shifting subjectivity beyond the dramatic text. *Vis-à-vis* black feminist discourse it is an attempt to forge a link between, in this instance, the dramatic praxis (in Chapter Four) and black female materiality.

My discomfort in this situation is signalled by highlighting the *taboo* of detailing for a white community *intra*-cultural forms of oppression and denigration. I then attempt to critically interrogate my own approaches to teaching For Colored Girls; in the first instance as a young black theatre post-graduate who naively presumed to shared black cultural images with the white students, and three years later when I acknowledged the limited awareness of theatre studies students of black history in general and black modes of cultural production in particular.

Acknowledging the students limited awareness of discourses of race and difference, and perceiving the hostility that arises as a result of my needing to clarify my racial difference, I question the ways in which I represent or offer myself to be seen in a white institutional context. Ever conscious of conforming to a representation of myself that might reduce me to an honorary white academic, I attempt to highlight the ways in which, through teaching, I offer students alternative ways of viewing theatre history, ones that include contributions made by African-Americans. At the same time, I re-frame myself in a black world view, thus offering myself to be seen as a black female theatre academic who also engages with white forms of theatre and cultural practice.

The thesis functions partly as a response to the black feminist scholars cited at the beginning of this introduction who question the whereabouts of "our books" on intellectual issues, books that address black women's on-going intellectual concerns.

I too was struck during the process of research by the absence of research, even in the United States, that seeks to examine black female theatre practitioners. While there appears to be an increase of theses on black women's fiction and feminist theories, there is very little that attempts to apply those same theories to black women and theatre. One exception is the unpublished PhD thesis of Katana L Hall.[28] Hall's study is a descriptive analysis of plays written by black women between 1916 and 1930. Writing from a purely Afrocentric and black feminist materialist position, Hall refuses to highlight any differences, preferring instead to emphasise and describe what unites the

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articulate the issue of being in the minority, or, the only black woman amongst a predominantly white and middle-class intellectuals and theatre practitioners.

28 Katana L Hall, "Reclaiming the Legacy: An Afracentric Analysis of Selected Plays by African-American Wimmin Playwrights." Diss. 1991 Bowling Green State University.

black women and their dramatic texts. Thus Hall selects her plays for discussion on the basis that: they were written by African-American women; they were written and/or published between 1916 and 1930; the plays exhibit at least one empowered black woman character who responds as a subject and maintains her identity; the selected plays have at least one supporting or minor black woman character who interacts with the principal character; and finally because the plays were accessible to the average reader.

In contrast, this thesis foregrounds the complexity and diversity of black women's dramatic writing and historical narratives, and attempts to construct a feminist theoretical discourse that acknowledges this complexity and diversity. While Hall's thesis demonstrates the need to draw on a tradition of black women's theatre that speaks to commonalities, this project seeks to stress the validity of problematic and/or contradictory elements that arise when an attempt is made to theorize black female subjectivity by recourse to black women's cultural production, specifically dramatic writing.

If Brown-Guillory situates a tradition of "maverick women" playwrights from the 1920s to the 1970s, then this thesis might be viewed as an attempt to establish an equally maverick black female and feminist tradition. One that involves the black female subject, shifting between and within disparate cultural, historical (feminist) theoretical, and dramatic strands, for the sake of foregrounding the black female tradition of defining "ourselves" through representations of historical narratives, modes of cultural production and multiple selves, in order that we might defy interlocking racist and sexist forms of oppression.

In this way, a theatre of black women as examined in the thesis along with black female subjects and black feminist epistemologies, might be viewed as spaces or sites of seamless radical potential, predicated on subjectivities that are shifting and indeterminate, subjectivities that continues to militate against specificity.

CHAPTER ONE

BLACK CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND POLITICAL ACTION: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Introduction

In response to a "phenomenon that has become known as Eurocentrism" (Young 2) theories of black history and racial oppression have emerged to challenge the hegemony of dominant intellectual discourses. Encyclopaedic historical narratives written by black scholars and intellectuals, such as those that were written to record and document the history of white domination and black racial oppression,[1] have given way to newer cultural and historical theories which seek to view the nature of black history and the black psyche from a specifically Afrocentric perspective.[2]

The aim of this chapter is to examine the ways in which traditional discourses of black American history primarily of the 1920s and the 1960s, sought to expose the problems inherent in attempting to establish a specific black culture and politics within the confines of a white dominant ideology, resulting in a pervasive assimilation into mainstream ideology of the former by the latter. For this it is useful to understand the ways in which histories of black cultural and/or political discourse might be viewed as sites of ideological struggle. The specific intention here is deliberately to draw similarities between how one perceives the process of recording history and the resultant historical documents, alongside the creation of the dramatic process and the subsequent written (dramatic) text that might arise from it.[3]

The view that representations of history or historical texts are as carefully constructed as the dramatic text means that it is no longer tenable to view historical 'fact' as value-free. The recognition "that the narrative can be said to determine the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative" (Scott 24), means that form,

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1 I refer to the works of scholars such as Eugene Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made (London: Andre Deutch Ltd, 1975) Future page references to text will follow the citation; Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: William Morrow, 1967). Future page references to this text will follow the citation; W.E.B Du Bois, The Souls Of Black Folks (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1965); Joyce Ladner, Tomorrow's Tomorrow (New York: Anchor Books, 1972). These are just a few examples of writers who record the injustices of black racial oppression and/or white hegemonic rule in twentieth century America.

2 Barbara Christian for example employs this perspective in direct response to a taken-for-granted Eurocentric world view. See Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980); see also Houston A Baker Jr., Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

3 Hayden White draws similar parallels in Tropics of Discourse 51-80.

through which the historical is presented, is as crucial to understanding the thrust of the ideology as is the content or narrative. Similarly, the narrative of the dramatic text is crafted or shaped to offer "metaphorical or symbolic system[s] of representing the world."[4]

The fictionalisation of the historical text/narrative might be viewed as similar to the theatricalisation of the dramatic text/narrative, because in both instances ideas themselves are always of a "contingent and provisional nature" (White 82). Thus established, it would appear that the form, or "manner" of representation, either of the dramatic or the historical narrative will play a large part in the way that the reader/spectator interprets the values that are being communicated. It might further be argued that, seen from this perspective, and to a greater extent, literary or dramatic form can dictate the way in which the content is constructed and received. This would not only lead one to question the "opposition between myth and history" (White 82), but also to re-think the ways in which so-called historical facts are governed by ideological premises which seek to privilege certain sets of information over and above others. Thus black feminist revisionist history looks to bring into view sets of experiences and historical narratives peculiar to black women because they perceive an absence of such information from much of the white feminist history which is concerned to analyse the oppression of women.[5]

The process of recording historical fact, then, involves two elements that are contingent upon one another: the mode or "manner" of representation, which itself becomes of crucial importance *because* - and this is this is the second element - it is being written for a particular readership. This is not dissimilar to the way in which a playwright might employ formal and stylistic modes of representation in order to address the socio-political concerns of a particular audience.[6] This is not to suggest that

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4 Tracy B Strong, "Dramaturgical Discourse and Political Enactments: Towards an Artistic Foundation For Political Space" in Structure Consciousness and History (eds.) Richard H. Brown and Stanford M. Lyman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978) (249). Strong effects a similar analysis in her essay. Here however, she looks to the ways in which political as opposed to historical discourses might be constructed in a similar manner to what she terms "drama", arguing that in drama, as in political theoretical writing, "manner" gives way to "meaning" (247).

5 Numerous examples could be cited here. See for example Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter To Mary Daly", in Sister Outsider (New York: The Crossing Pier, 1984); bell hooks, in Ain't I A Woman offers an intricate examination of this area in the chapter entitled "Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability" 119-158. Christian also attempts to redress the balance in Black Women Novelists and examines representations of black womanhood as constructed during slavery; Angela Davis, Women Race and Class (London: The Women's Press, 1982) in which she acknowledges the monumental activities of the early suffragists in Great Britain and the United States, while simultaneously drawing attention to the racist tenor of both, 70-86; The Combahee River Collective, a foundation of black feminists established in 1974 challenge the presumptions of white feminists who homologise the category of women, see the Collective's " A Black Feminist Statement" in Feminisms: A Reader (ed.) Maggie Humm (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) 134-136. This list is by no means exhaustive.

6 See for example Claudia Tate's interview with Ntozake Shange in Black Women Writers At Work 149-174.

historical narratives are only ever achieved when the historian knows the socio-political configuration of the reader(s). It does, however, point to the fact that the idea of a supposedly objective nature of writing history "as an end in itself" (White 40) is a naive assumption.

The process of writing history, or historical narratives is always a re-writing, not necessarily of the facts themselves, but a re-writing of the ideological postulations which though not necessarily immediately visible, are nevertheless interwoven with what one perceives as 'the facts'. In other words, "a set of events originally encoded in one way is simply being decoded by being recoded in another" (White 97), so that the history, or sets of historical representations, become not only socio-politically and ideologically specific to the time in which they were written but also culturally specific to a given era. The strategy of (re-)writing history becomes a drama of competing terms and ideologies, in which the writer-historian seeks to foreground what s/he perceives as the truth of certain historical events which may or may not include facts omitted in other historical accounts of the same phenomena.

Once again similarities can be drawn between this process of historical reconstruction and the ways in which the theatre practitioner, in this instance the playwright, allows for the inclusion of the fictive element, while history as an intellectual discipline seeks to be objective.[7]

Hayden White offers a view of historical representation that speaks to the historical narrative as a set of emplotments (a term coined by White) which like psychoanalytic therapy seek to "endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings" (88). He argues that

> The important point is that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings. (85)

Furthermore, like Tracey Strong, he uses as a conceptual model a discourse that is more specifically dramatic than generally literary. Arguing for the propensity of the historian to write the historical narrative as a strategic endeavour, by suppressing one set of events at the expense of the others (or alternatively foregrounding one set of events at the expense of others), White considers the ways in which historical narrative strategies or, emplotments, employ "all of the techniques that we would normally

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7 Hayden White in Tropics of Discourse eschews what he terms the "proper historian" and argues that it is no longer justifiable to view history as an objective discipline, that is situated half way between the arts and the sciences, primarily because "when contemporary historians speak of the 'art' of history, they seem to have in mind a conception of art that would admit little more than a nineteenth-century novel as a paradigm.... When historians speak of themselves as scientists, they seem to be invoking a conception of the science that was perfectly suitable for the world in which Herbert Spencer lived and worked, but it has very little to do with physical sciences as they have developed *since* Einstein." (40-42)

expect to find in a ... novel or play" (84). In this instance, he is referring to the generic categorisations under which both the dramatic and literary text tend to be classified. Referring to nineteenth-century historians, he writes of the way in which the French revolution was constructed by the French historian Michelet "as a drama of Romantic transcendence" while his contemporary de Tocqueville emplotted "the same set of events as ironic Tragedy" (85). His insistence however that "historians share with the *audience*" (emphasis added)[8] an understanding of that which is tragic as opposed to romantic or comic makes specific the relationship between playwright-spectator (writer-reader), between cultural production and cultural forms. Thus, rather than viewing the writer (historian) as an isolated intellectual who records truthfully historical narratives for a reader who requires a certain set of facts on given historical phenomena, it is possible instead to view this relationship as one in which the historian offers the reader a sense of the "real world ... by endowing what originally appears to problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognisable, because it is a familiar, form".(98)[9]

The familiar or recognisable forms that White perceives are the generic categorisation of tragedy, comedy, romantic and the ironic.[10] These forms are themselves culturally specific that is to say, the notion of what is romantic, or comic is only understandable because such concepts are always already culturally endowed with meaning[11] so that

> [u]nless you have some idea of the generic attributes of tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic situations, you will be unable to recognise them as such when you come upon them in a literary text. [Historical narratives] may all be inherently ironic, but they need not be emplotted that way.... Anyway, we only think of situations as tragic or comic because these concepts are part of our generally cultural and specifically literary heritage (85).[12]

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8 It is interesting that he refers to an audience here and not a reader. Arguably it points to the added dimension of the dramatic as opposed to the merely literary thrust of his essay.

9 This presumes that historians have a "true" notion of what is "real" and credits them with knowing what is universally recognisable.

10 Here of course he is appropriating Northrop Frye's categorisations see Anatomy of Criticism (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957).

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12 This point bears comment. It is doubtless that White is referring to the Western literary and cultural heritage. Henry Louis Gates Jr., argues against the notion of a totalising literary canon with "all white, and mostly male " writers, insisting that for "authors [who] purportedly share a common culture, inherited from both the Greco-Roman or the Judeo-Christian traditions, there was no need to speak of matters of race, since the race of these authors was ... 'the same'. One

CHAPTER ONE

BLACK CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND POLITICAL ACTION: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Introduction

In response to a "phenomenon that has become known as Eurocentrism" (Young 2) theories of black history and racial oppression have emerged to challenge the hegemony of dominant intellectual discourses. Encyclopaedic historical narratives written by black scholars and intellectuals, such as those that were written to record and document the history of white domination and black racial oppression,[1] have given way to newer cultural and historical theories which seek to view the nature of black history and the black psyche from a specifically Afrocentric perspective.[2]

The aim of this chapter is to examine the ways in which traditional discourses of black American history primarily of the 1920s and the 1960s, sought to expose the problems inherent in attempting to establish a specific black culture and politics within the confines of a white dominant ideology, resulting in a pervasive assimilation into mainstream ideology of the former by the latter. For this it is useful to understand the ways in which histories of black cultural and/or political discourse might be viewed as sites of ideological struggle. The specific intention here is deliberately to draw similarities between how one perceives the process of recording history and the resultant historical documents, alongside the creation of the dramatic process and the subsequent written (dramatic) text that might arise from it.[3]

The view that representations of history or historical texts are as carefully constructed as the dramatic text means that it is no longer tenable to view historical 'fact' as value-free. The recognition "that the narrative can be said to determine the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative" (Scott 24), means that form,

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1 I refer to the works of scholars such as Eugene Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made (London: Andre Deutch Ltd, 1975) Future page references to text will follow the citation; Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: William Morrow, 1967). Future page references to this text will follow the citation; W.E.B Du Bois, The Souls Of Black Folks (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1965); Joyce Ladner, Tomorrow's Tomorrow (New York: Anchor Books, 1972). These are just a few examples of writers who record the injustices of black racial oppression and/or white hegemonic rule in twentieth century America.

2 Barbara Christian for example employs this perspective in direct response to a taken-for-granted Eurocentric world view. See Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980); see also Houston A Baker Jr., Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

3 Hayden White draws similar parallels in Tropics of Discourse 51-80.

through which the historical is presented, is as crucial to understanding the thrust of the ideology as is the content or narrative. Similarly, the narrative of the dramatic text is crafted or shaped to offer "metaphorical or symbolic system[s] of representing the world."[4]

The fictionalisation of the historical text/narrative might be viewed as similar to the theatricalisation of the dramatic text/narrative, because in both instances ideas themselves are always of a "contingent and provisional nature" (White 82). Thus established, it would appear that the form, or "manner" of representation, either of the dramatic or the historical narrative will play a large part in the way that the reader/spectator interprets the values that are being communicated. It might further be argued that, seen from this perspective, and to a greater extent, literary or dramatic form can dictate the way in which the content is constructed and received. This would not only lead one to question the "opposition between myth and history" (White 82), but also to re-think the ways in which so-called historical facts are governed by ideological premises which seek to privilege certain sets of information over and above others. Thus black feminist revisionist history looks to bring into view sets of experiences and historical narratives peculiar to black women because they perceive an absence of such information from much of the white feminist history which is concerned to analyse the oppression of women.[5]

The process of recording historical fact, then, involves two elements that are contingent upon one another: the mode or "manner" of representation, which itself becomes of crucial importance *because* - and this is this is the second element - it is being written for a particular readership. This is not dissimilar to the way in which a playwright might employ formal and stylistic modes of representation in order to address the socio-political concerns of a particular audience.[6] This is not to suggest that

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4 Tracy B Strong, "Dramaturgical Discourse and Political Enactments: Towards an Artistic Foundation For Political Space" in Structure Consciousness and History (eds.) Richard H. Brown and Stanford M. Lyman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978) (249). Strong effects a similar analysis in her essay. Here however, she looks to the ways in which political as opposed to historical discourses might be constructed in a similar manner to what she terms "drama", arguing that in drama, as in political theoretical writing, "manner" gives way to "meaning" (247).

5 Numerous examples could be cited here. See for example Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter To Mary Daly", in Sister Outsider (New York: The Crossing Pier, 1984); bell hooks, in Ain't I A Woman offers an intricate examination of this area in the chapter entitled "Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability" 119-158. Christian also attempts to redress the balance in Black Women Novelists and examines representations of black womanhood as constructed during slavery; Angela Davis, Women Race and Class (London: The Women's Press, 1982) in which she acknowledges the monumental activities of the early suffragists in Great Britain and the United States, while simultaneously drawing attention to the racist tenor of both, 70-86; The Combahee River Collective, a foundation of black feminists established in 1974 challenge the presumptions of white feminists who homologise the category of women, see the Collective's " A Black Feminist Statement" in Feminisms: A Reader (ed.) Maggie Humm (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) 134-136. This list is by no means exhaustive.

6 See for example Claudia Tate's interview with Ntozake Shange in Black Women Writers At Work 149-174.

historical narratives are only ever achieved when the historian knows the socio-political configuration of the reader(s). It does, however, point to the fact that the idea of a supposedly objective nature of writing history "as an end in itself" (White 40) is a naive assumption.

The process of writing history, or historical narratives is always a re-writing, not necessarily of the facts themselves, but a re-writing of the ideological postulations which though not necessarily immediately visible, are nevertheless interwoven with what one perceives as 'the facts'. In other words, "a set of events originally encoded in one way is simply being decoded by being recoded in another" (White 97), so that the history, or sets of historical representations, become not only socio-politically and ideologically specific to the time in which they were written but also culturally specific to a given era. The strategy of (re-)writing history becomes a drama of competing terms and ideologies, in which the writer-historian seeks to foreground what s/he perceives as the truth of certain historical events which may or may not include facts omitted in other historical accounts of the same phenomena.

Once again similarities can be drawn between this process of historical reconstruction and the ways in which the theatre practitioner, in this instance the playwright, allows for the inclusion of the fictive element, while history as an intellectual discipline seeks to be objective.[7]

Hayden White offers a view of historical representation that speaks to the historical narrative as a set of emplotments (a term coined by White) which like psychoanalytic therapy seek to "endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings" (88). He argues that

> The important point is that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings. (85)

Furthermore, like Tracey Strong, he uses as a conceptual model a discourse that is more specifically dramatic than generally literary. Arguing for the propensity of the historian to write the historical narrative as a strategic endeavour, by suppressing one set of events at the expense of the others (or alternatively foregrounding one set of events at the expense of others), White considers the ways in which historical narrative strategies or, emplotments, employ "all of the techniques that we would normally

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7 Hayden White in Tropics of Discourse eschews what he terms the "proper historian" and argues that it is no longer justifiable to view history as an objective discipline, that is situated half way between the arts and the sciences, primarily because "when contemporary historians speak of the 'art' of history, they seem to have in mind a conception of art that would admit little more than a nineteenth-century novel as a paradigm.... When historians speak of themselves as scientists, they seem to be invoking a conception of the science that was perfectly suitable for the world in which Herbert Spencer lived and worked, but it has very little to do with physical sciences as they have developed *since* Einstein." (40-42)

expect to find in a ... novel or play" (84). In this instance, he is referring to the generic categorisations under which both the dramatic and literary text tend to be classified. Referring to nineteenth-century historians, he writes of the way in which the French revolution was constructed by the French historian Michelet "as a drama of Romantic transcendence" while his contemporary de Tocqueville emplotted "the same set of events as ironic Tragedy" (85). His insistence however that "historians share with the *audience*" (emphasis added)[8] an understanding of that which is tragic as opposed to romantic or comic makes specific the relationship between playwright-spectator (writer-reader), between cultural production and cultural forms. Thus, rather than viewing the writer (historian) as an isolated intellectual who records truthfully historical narratives for a reader who requires a certain set of facts on given historical phenomena, it is possible instead to view this relationship as one in which the historian offers the reader a sense of the "real world ... by endowing what originally appears to problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognisable, because it is a familiar, form".(98)[9]

The familiar or recognisable forms that White perceives are the generic categorisation of tragedy, comedy, romantic and the ironic.[10] These forms are themselves culturally specific that is to say, the notion of what is romantic, or comic is only understandable because such concepts are always already culturally endowed with meaning[11] so that

> [u]nless you have some idea of the generic attributes of tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic situations, you will be unable to recognise them as such when you come upon them in a literary text. [Historical narratives] may all be inherently ironic, but they need not be emplotted that way.... Anyway, we only think of situations as tragic or comic because these concepts are part of our generally cultural and specifically literary heritage (85).[12]

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8 It is interesting that he refers to an audience here and not a reader. Arguably it points to the added dimension of the dramatic as opposed to the merely literary thrust of his essay.

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Consequently, the historian must draw upon "a fund of culturally provided *mythoi*" (White 60), *mythoi* which the reader-spectator requires in order to be able to understand, or, to employ White's term, decode the narrative events in the historical text.

Viewed thus, the historical narrative and historical representations are not only unstable elements.[13] Insofar as they are *constructed* as opposed to being universal and transcendent signifiers, they might also be viewed ideologically as "elements of a verbal structure which [are] always written for a specific (manifest or latent) purpose. This means that ... 'History' is never simply history, but always 'history-for'"(56). Not only does "history-for" presuppose a given readership (or spectatorship), it also highlights, to return to an earlier assertion, the fact that there is an interactive process in the writing of historical narratives which, rather like the rehearsal process, or the dramatic writing process, keeps in view a spectator who is already cognizant with a whole series of cultural and ideological (manifest or latent) forms. All discourse, discourse being "the verbal operation by which the questioning consciousness situates its own efforts to bring a problematical domain of experience under cognitive control" (White 21), is for White, tropological. That is to say, all discourses "deviate from one possible meaning ... towards another meaning, conception, or ideal of what is right, and proper and true 'in reality'" (White 25). Arguably then, narratives of 'real' history are no more factual *per se*, than a fictive or dramatic rendering of an historical event. Thus instead of reading the historical text as a chronicle of past events, it would be equally as valid to read it in terms of where it positions itself ideologically and what manner or trope(s) the writer employs in order to situate it within its ideological framework. Furthermore, it might be possible, as White attempts to demonstrate, to make a correlation between tropological persuasion and ideological bias, or intentions.[14] This last point leads to questioning the status of those historical narratives written by black intellectuals.

If indeed the historical narrative is comprised of a series of emplotments that are framed within recognisable cultural forms, that offer to the reader ideological postulations that may or may not be aligned to dominant ideological positions, then how does the black intellectual, s/he who is neither of Greco-Roman nor Judeo-Christian extraction, articulate an other history without inadvertently supplanting or subsuming what is non-familiar into a mainstream dominant ideology, so rendering it apparently familiar? Or, to put it more simply as Henry Louis Gates (1986) does: "how can the

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not heir to these traditions was, by definition, of another race." (6) "Race", Writing, And Difference 1-21.

13 There is little that White allows to slip by uninterrogated. Elsewhere in chapter 3 he questions what "historical representations are representations of" (8). I am reluctant at this stage to interrogate the premise of every word or compound word, but remain attentive to the fact that I too am constructing my own intellectual and/or ideological agenda in the course of writing.

14 See Tropics of Discourse, "Interpretation in History" 51-81 and "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 81-100.

black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence. Can writing,[15] with the very difference it makes and masks, mask[16] the blackness of the black face?" ("Race", Writing, and Difference 12). Gate's query will be duly dealt with in the course of the chapter.

The following section will be an attempt to examine two eras in African-American history which produced a (black) cultural renaissance (1920s) and a (black) social revolution, (1960s) in[17] an attempt to understand whether it is indeed possible "to speak the other's language without renouncing [our] own." ("Race, Writing, and Difference 333)

Refusing a logical and chronological approach to these two epochs, I shall deliberately employ what may at first appear to be a rather maverick progression, by examining the 1960s before the 1920s. A traditional historical approach would situate an historical narrative of the 1920s prior to that of the 1960s and assume that the events of black history during the 1960s are contingent upon those that took place some forty to fifty years previously. This causal approach to history is deliberately rejected because it might prove to be more enlightening and less (analytically) predictable to assume an approach which does not involve a metonymic analysis of the events. This is a form of analysis which attempts to comprehend historical phenomena by relating a cause to an effect. As a "model of direction" (White 73), a metonymic analysis may well be appropriate since White categorises it as a radical mode of ideological implication, (employed by Marx) with a tragic mode of emplotment (66). I am more concerned, however, to effect an historicist, reading which allows for an analysis of the moment in terms of the socio-political, cultural and ideological phenomena of the time. In doing so, and in contrast to Harold Cruse's historical analysis of the 1920s and 1960s in The Crisis of The Negro Intellectual (69) I reject a major tenet which perceives that the seeds for the events of the 1960s were sown in the 1920s.

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15 Here Gates is referring to writing as a literary discourse rather than historical discourses *per se*. Arguably, his statement is equally valid for constructions of history. His references to "masking" and "black-face" *vis-à-vis* the literary genre make explicit his own connection between African-American history and African-American writing.

16 An interesting use of theatrical metaphor here. The idea of *masking black face* might be read not only as a comment on the erasure of blackness as a sign from the Western literary canon; it might also be read as Gates' recognition of the fact that while black face minstrel performances were appropriated by white actors to caricature black people, black face was a popular tradition of theatre for a specifically black audience. By appropriating this form white performers re-defined the black face character in terms of a racially negative caricature. Gates' comment thus addresses the ways in which a specific cultural form can become homogenised and rendered as other, or negative, once it enters into a white mainstream literary or theatrical arena. See Houston A Baker, Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance 17-24 for a detailed history of Blackface minstrelsy.

17 Given the arguments that I have constructed in this section, I am alerted in a self reflexive motion to the dangers of asserting that there was *de jure* a black renaissance in the 1920s and a black revolution in the 1960s. There was also a "white renaissance" (Greenwich Village renaissance) in the 1920s and perhaps arguably, a "white revolution" in the 1960s.

While I do not wish to deny the continuity of political events over decades, (for example the Women's Suffrage movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, civil rights organisations for example), neither do I want to overdetermine the second half of the chapter *because* of the events that are discussed in the first.

I The Art of Survival: African-American Political Activism in the 1960s

The attempt to establish a specifically Afrocentric orientated literary and critical tradition has involved black female as well as black male intellectuals, even though, as Calvin Hernton points out in "The Sexual Mountain (1990), "the world of black literature in the United States has been a world of black men's literature".[18] In pointing to the apparent absence of black women from the canon of black literature, this statement ignores traditions of black feminist writing that have for sometime now seen black feminist scholars attempting to write, not only for the black literary canon, but at the interface between political action and cultural production. In so doing, they offer a challenge to the traditional hallmarks of a mainstream white patriarchal ideology: racism and sexism.[19]

Although the 1960s saw the emergence of a number of black women writers challenging (the legacy of) patriarchy, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that their writing began to establish itself as a valid black female literary tradition. Hernton observes that with the exception of Gwendolyn Brooks "and perhaps Margaret Walker, not ... one black woman writer and not one female protagonist was accorded a worthy status in the black literary world" (196). This curious absence of black women prompts one to question the reason for this absence, especially in the light of the racial, social and political upheavals that occurred in the 1960s. In other words, to what

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18 Hernton could be accused of attempting to perpetuate his own statement here. Alice Walker's The Color Purple had been out on general release before Hernton's essay was published, yet he fails to mention this. Furthermore, Barbara Omolade acknowledges in the same anthology that there *was* a revolution of black women's writing in the 1970s and in the 1980s, see Barbara Omolade, "The Silence And The Song" (290).

19 Arguably, all black feminist intellectuals write in response to racism and/or sexism. However, their individual approaches are contingent on their being social scientists, poets, novelists and so on. Audre Lorde for example in "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", writes from the position of "a forty-nine year old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy and [as] a member of an inter-racial couple" (114). (Sister Outsider 114-123). Other examples include Alice Walker, The Temple of My Familiar (London: Penguin, 1990) and In Search Of Our Mothers' Garden: Womanist Prose (London: The Women's Press, 1983); Lorraine Hansberry; A Raisin In The Sun (New York: Samuel French, 1959); Ntozake Shange, Sassafrass, Cyress & Indigo (New York: St Martins Press, 1982); Jacqueline Rudet, Basin in Black Plays (ed) Yvonne Brewster (London: Methuen, 1987); Lisa Evans, Stamping and Shouting and Singing Home in Plays by Women: Volume Seven (ed) Mary Remnant (London: Methuen:1988); Jackie Kay, Chiaroscuro in Lesbian Plays (ed) Jill Davies (London: Methuen, 1987).

degree, and for what reasons were black female writers and activists less prominent than their male counterparts at a time when the "Black Power" slogan had become the political rallying cry of African-Americans? Or, to pose the same question inversely, to what degree, or why were black male figures worthy of a status that, according to bell hooks (1982), was categorically denied to black women?[20]

Following in the tradition of black feminist writers who effect cultural and political analyses from historical and/or politically orientated narratives, the aim is to examine the events that precipitated the rise of black civil rights organisations in the 1960s and the socio-political aims of these organisations for people of African-American descent. If, as C L R James noted in his 1967 analysis of the movement, the major tenet of the Black power movement was "to restore to the blacks ... the political power which is theirs by right", then to what extent did the need for black political power in a dominant white mainstream ideology also necessitate compromises that may or may not have led to the absence or marginalisation of certain other black factors, in order to obtain the desired ends? Thus rather than looking to whether or not the Black Power movement was successful in achieving political power, the overall concern is to examine what cultural, racial political and ideological concessions had to be made when black political activists negotiated with dominant ideological forces in a society that only one hundred years previously viewed racial difference as "the antithetical position to the white on the scale of humanity" (Gates 231).

The thirty years between the 1940s and the 1970s might be viewed as one of the most dramatic periods of transition in black American and global black history but in America "the dimension of the upheaval of the Sixties was indeed unprecedented and its influence colossal" (Abraham 189). In "The Triumph of Nationalism" Rotberg examines the movement that "encouraged educated Africans ... to seek new ways to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with colonial rule".[21] As African and Arab states gained their independence and became self governing African-Americans began to articulate their anger towards their colonised status in both Northern and, particularly, Southern states of America.

The actual events that precipitated the wave of violent and non-violent protests of the 1960s cannot be reduced to one or two catalytic incidents, although black historians often select an historic moment that in their view galvanised African-Americans to protest and revolt against racial injustice. Louis Lomax writing during the

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20 See bell hooks, Ain't I A Woman 159-196.

21 See Robert I Rotberg, "The Triumph of Nationalism", in Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century (eds.) S.Okechukwu Mezu and Ram Desai (New York: Black Academy Press 1970) (85) 85-106. Here Rotberg details the dates that various African states gained their independence and/or became self-governing: Sudan in 1955, Ghana previously the Gold Coast, in 1957, Togo and Cameroon in 1960, Nigeria in 1960. Sierra Leone gained independence in 1960 and became self-governing in 1961.

period of this upheaval, cites the famous case of Rosa Parks who in 1955 refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man.(81) Twelve years previous to this event, Asa Philip Randolph, leading the 1942 March on Washington Movement, called for ten thousand blacks to march on Washington in protest against unequal working opportunities and living conditions for African-Americans. In his keynote speech to the Policy Conference in 1942, Randolph rallied for Negro mass action against

> segregation, and jim-crow in the Government, the Army, Navy, Air Corps, U S Marines, Coast Guard, Women's Auxiliary Army Corps and the Waves, and defense industries; the elimination of discriminations in hotels, restaurants, on public transportation and conveyances, in educational, recreational, cultural, and amusement and entertainment places such as theatres, beaches and so forth. (Boderick and Meier 202-3).

This call for mass non-violent action is described by Boderick *et al.* as "the Movement [that] prefigured in many ways the militant contemporary movement for civil rights". Finally, the power and hegemonic rule that whites had gained and instituted over blacks via a steady process of colonisation, both on the African and Asian continents and in the United States, was being challenged and eroded by various forms of resistance that sought to dismantle hegemonic white cultural and political rule.

Thus, although the 1960s saw the naked response of African-Americans to segregation, the civil rights action and protests that would lead to the upheaval of the 1960s was already in motion twenty years previously. The return of African-American soldiers from World War Two, for example, played a crucial part in precipitating a (black) public outcry against racial discrimination. While black soldiers had achieved a measure of racial equality as allies against Hitler and had received the same adulation as their white counterparts in Europe, they were still considered to be racially and socially inferior on arriving home. As Lomax points out: "Negro soldiers had come home from a war against Hitler's race madness only to face incredible insults and police brutality at the hands of the nation they had risked their lives to defend" (73).[22]

African-American soldiers were not the only targets of racist ideology after World War Two. It is perhaps no coincidence that the debate surrounding the black woman and her role within the family (in the United States), increased after World War Two. It could be argued that one way of perpetuating the myth of racial, specifically black, inferiority would be to offer representations of the black family unit as deviant or pathological. The most contested report on the black family was undertaken by Daniel Moynihan in 1960, the results were published in 1965.

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22 See also Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, Their Place on Stage (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); Brown-Guillory discusses the racial denigration of World War Two soldiers who returned triumphant from the war (26).Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

In an unprecedented attack on the African-American family, Moynihan detailed the reports from the 1960 consensus in New York that led him to argue that "the concentration of problems in the Negro community *is* exceptional, [but] prejudice, low income, poor education explain only so much". Moynihan's findings led him to make racist assumptions on the structure and nature of the African-American family. This angered black scholars because it was felt that Moynihan had come to his findings by comparing "Negroes with whites on standardized objective measures which have been demonstrated to have meaning only in the white, European subculture. Many statistical studies that compare Negroes and whites fall into the almost inevitable position of characterizing the Negro group as deviant" (Billingsley 200). Thus the black family was perceived as a deviant unit because of the 353,000 Negro families in the New York metropolitan area,

> a quarter were headed by women. In contrast, less than one-tenth of the white households were headed by women. The rate of illegitimacy among Negroes is about fourteen times or fifteen times that among whites....Broken homes and illegitimacy do not necessarily mean poor upbringing and emotional problems. But they mean it more often when the mother is forced to work (as the Negro mother so often is), when the father is incapable of contributing to support (as the Negro father so often is), when fathers and mother refuse to accept responsibility for and resent their children, as Negro parents overwhelmed by difficulties, so often do (Moynihan 50).

As Michele Wallace states: "everybody wanted to cut Daniel Moynihan's heart out and feed it to the dogs" (11).

There is a tendency when referring to the civil rights movement to see it as one of unequivocal solidarity between all black men and women and to maintain that the increasing protests of women and gay and lesbian communities helped to forge one of the biggest or at least most cohesive social revolutions in America so far this century.[23] That the black community became politically organised cannot be denied: "In 1963 alone there were more than two thousand demonstrations and more than ten thousand demonstrators were arrested"(Bennett 6). This cannot be dismissed as the paltry efforts of a few malcontents. However, it would be flagrantly biased to overlook the differences which emerged during the revolts and the noticeable but curious absences of black female activists in historical narratives by both black and white scholars.[24]

Perhaps it is inevitable that, with the passage of time, the minutiae of socio-political events become obscured or confused resulting in over-generalisations which are not wholly consistent with the actual turn of events. Yet often, that which appears to be insignificant is crucial to understanding the construction of the whole. Kenneth

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23 See Hugh D Graham, Civil Rights and The Presidency: Race and Gender in American Politics 1960-1972 (New York: Open University Press, 1992) 12-25 also 46-67.

24 An absence noted by Calvin Hernton in his essay "The Sexual Mountain".

Clarke, (1970) a notable black psychologist of the 1950s and 1960s, draws a crucial distinction between the terms civil rights *movement* and civil rights *organisations* and questions whether the social upheaval of the 1960s can be viewed as an actual revolution. Writing in the late 1950s, he insisted that the civil rights *movement* could not be viewed as synonymous with civil rights *organisations*, because the *movement* "had its own historic and impersonal momentum, responsive to deep and powerful economic and international events and political ideological forces beyond the control of individuals, agencies, or perhaps individual governments" (Clarke 109).

For Clarke, the civil rights *movement* was in part an inherent and inevitable mechanism of capitalist society. He cites the example of teaching African slaves to read, not as a gesture of humanity, but as an economic necessity, since slaves were required to be "skilled adaptable and efficient" (Clarke 107).[25] Linked to certain forms of oppression or oppressive regimes are complementary (inherent) forms or concessions to civil rights, no matter how small or grudging, which become a functional necessity. Clarke's example of the invasion of Africa by the New World immigrants is a case in point. The journeys of New World missionaries to the continent of Africa were made in the name of Christianity. Eventually

> the contradiction between the practical economic and status advantages associated with slavery and racial oppression, and the Judao-Christianity ideals of love and brotherhood and their translation into the democratic ideology of equality and justice (Clarke 107),

formed the essential conflict of the civil rights movement. The example referred to earlier, that of African soldiers returning to America after the second world war, is a more contemporary version of this phenomenon.

The civil rights movement was on-going and autonomous insofar as it did not require the kind of structural organisation that characterised the civil rights organisations. The organisations, however, came about *as a result* of the movement. Thus "the uncontrollable power and momentum of the civil rights movement impelled it to create the necessary machinery, organisations, and leaders" (Clarke 109).

It is the civil rights organisations and their leaders who continue to generate the most interest in contemporary cultural and revisionist history, particularly in the case of

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25 It needs to remembered that the American slave laws made it illegal for slaves to be taught to read and write. See William Goodell, The American Slave Code - In Theory and Practice; Its Distinctive Features Shown by Its Statutes, Judicial Decisions and Illustrative Facts (London: Clarke, Beeton and Co., n.d.). "The slave, being held as a Chattel, is held by a Tenure which excludes any legal recognition of his Rights as a thinking and religious Being." (x) See also 232-238. While Goodell's volume does not stress the illegality of educating slaves, it was acknowledged that intellectual and religious rights were not to be granted (233).

Malcolm X.[26] Yet during the 1960s, these organisation and their leaders exhibited significant differences in terms of demonstration tactics, negotiating strategies and political aims, despite the fact that they shared the overall goal of racial equality. These differences need not be viewed as unduly negative. The fragmentary nature of the movement as a whole only serves to highlight the varying as opposed to homogenous interests and priorities of the African-American communities at the time.

One of the main areas of contention was the issue of integration, or as it was more commonly known, desegregation. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, was and remains the oldest civil rights organisation in the United States. While the NAACP was considered to be a relatively militant civil rights organisation, it met with increasing demands from other organisations and the fermenting social situation, to if not up-date and modernise its tactics, then at least to improve its approach and methods in the drive towards desegregation. The NAACP was always going to meet with opposition from younger, more recently established civil rights activists and groups. From the outset, its membership included both African-American and white liberals - this was common to a number of the organisations. However, the NAACP had as its leader

> a dignified intellectual, Harvard-educated, detached, aloof, and cold, ... [in] the tradition of a nineteenth-century New England aristocrat poet-actionist-crusader ... but also intensely concerned and committed to the attainment of unqualified justice and equality for Negroes (Clarke 111).

W.E.B. Du Bois, an elder statesman of the civil rights movement, was uncompromising in his demands for unequivocal racial equality.[27] Under his leadership,

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26 See for example Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* (1993). The re-issue of his autobiography The Autobiography Of Malcolm X (London: Penguin, 1968) was timed to coincide with the release of the film. See Marshall Frady, "The Life and Legacy of Malcolm X" Sunday Times Magazine 14 Feb. 1993. The author notes that "Twenty-seven years after his sudden death ... his presence still hangs palpably among us. It's not merely in the speckling of Xs on caps and T-shirts which one now sees everywhere (even on Bill Clinton's jogging cap).... In this cinematic Second Coming, Malcolm promises finally to pass, in one form at least, into the mythology of America". See also Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X And The Black Revolution. (London: Free Association Press, and New York: The Guilford Press, 1981).

27 See Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race", in "Race", Writing And Difference 21-37 in which he argues that Du Bois was the most considered and engaged social theorist this century. For more on, and/or by Du Bois, see the following which can only serve as a guide to the mound of scholarship on his life and works; L Hanga Goldis and O V Melkian, "W E B Du Bois: Scientist and Public Figure", in Black Leaders of The Twentieth Century 153-167; F L Broderick and A Meier (ed.) Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965) 30-62; Philip S Foner, American Socialism And Black Americans (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977) 182-201; Nathan I Huggins, "Afro-Americans", in Ethnic Leadership In America (ed.) John Higham (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1978) 91-119; W.E.B Du Bois, The Autobiography of W E B Du Bois (N.p.: International Press, 1968); The Seventh Son: The Thought and Writings of W.E.B. Du Bois Vol I & II (ed.) Julius Lester (New York: Random House, 1971); W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folks; Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920).

the NAACP developed into a primarily legal civil rights base. It was the NAACP who, in 1954, took the Board of Education to the Supreme Court to demand the desegregation of schools in all American states, insisting that in depriving black children of the right to a full and comprehensive education equal to that of their white peers, the State contravened the humanitarian and constitutional rights of the African-American child. Thus the NAACP sought to appeal, through the democratic process, to the moral and political conscience of the pre-dominantly white American population and their institutions. The legal emphasis of NAACP, with its reputable lawyers, set the tone for the NAACP. Arguably, its own gentlemanly approach to exacting equal status for African-Americans, its profound sense of fair-play by both black and white Americans, resulted in its becoming rather like its founding leader: "dignified ... detached ... aloof", the aristocratic arm of the civil rights organisations. While such characteristics were perhaps in keeping with mid-nineteenth-century to early- twentieth-century codes of conduct, by the mid-1960s, when black leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were taking part in huge demonstrations and protests through towns and cities in the United States, they were certainly outmoded, or inappropriate to the changing demands of the time.

In contrast, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), formed in 1955 and 1960 respectively, developed and implemented tactics and strategies which were perhaps more accessible to African-Americans, whether working or middle class.[28] This is not to suggest that the SCLC and SNCC were predominantly organisations of the so-called average African-American person. Rather, they sought to mobilise African-Americans and whites in non-violent sit-ins, demonstrations and protests, in order to increase the pressure on the government to desegregate American society. In contrast the methods and techniques of the NAACP in 1965 "were essentially the same as 1920. The only significant difference [was] an increase in the number of staff particularly in the Legal Defense and Education fund" (Clarke 116). According to Clarke, the leading civil rights organisations along with The National Urban League (hereafter Urban League) and the Commission of Racial Equality (CORE) were all concerned to highlight the injustice of racial humiliation and desegregation by various means, disruptive and otherwise. Chosen leaders came to embody the philosophy of their particular organisations and more often than not became celebrities of the cause.[29]

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28 Clarke outlines in detail the way in which various civil rights organisations sought to mobilise, or target specific sections of the black and white communities to protest and/or demonstrate.

29 Elsewhere in his essay, Clarke notes that these leaders were not elected by African-Americans. "Either they are essentially hired executives holding their office at the pleasure of a board of directors or else they emerge as leaders by charismatic power" (110), as King did.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr,[30] methodist preacher and president of the SCLC, became a symbol of peaceful protest and defiance. His philosophy of non-violence and love, his charismatic personality and eloquence, along with his tireless efforts to mobilise indifferent black and white Americans to the injustice of racism, earned him perhaps the biggest following during the period. The social success and popularity of the SCLC was extensive. Not all the organisations, however, were committed to social protest and demonstrations. The Urban League, for example, was dedicated to easing the transition of southern (migrant) African-Americans to Northern cities (Clarke 117). It provided a welfare service and tended to be more bureaucratic than, for example, the SCLC or SNCC. Founded one year after the NAACP, it was similar in conduct, though not in its policies, to the former.

In terms of their potential to effect legislative and statutory changes which had a bearing on the lives of so-called ordinary black people, the organisations would appear to have been relatively successful. The varying approaches to political objectives meant that in some way, the organisations were able to protest on a number of specific agendas all of which pointed in the general direction of racial equality. Thus the NAACP proved to be most effective on legal issues, the Urban league in bureaucratic affairs, while the younger organisations such as the SNCC and the SCLC aimed to mobilise that sector of society which formed the basis of the proletarian movement.[31] It could therefore be argued that civil rights organisations were themselves alternative institutions that worked within the status quo to effect changes, in order to arrive at a point of socio-racial co-operation and political stability. Such co-operation, however, is criticised by Bennett (1964) who argues that "interracial co-operation often ends up with Negroes coo-ing and white people operating" (34), suggesting that the perceived imbalance of power between the black community and the white community was unchanging. This would lead to questioning the status of the black power movement as an alternative ideological force within dominant ideological frameworks in which whites dominated. If it was a revolution as some have suggested,[32] the question remains: how were the socio-racial objectives achieved and stabilised?

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30 On Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., see Louis Lomax, To Kill A Black Man (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1968); Louis Lomax, The Negro Revolt (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963); 84-100; *by* Martin Luther King Jr, see A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr., (ed) J H Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986); Why We Can't Wait (New York: Penguin, 1964).

31 See C L R James, "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem", in The C L R James Reader (ed.) Anna Grimshaw (Massachusetts: Blackwell 1992) 182-189.(187). According to James the African-American citizen had the potential to become the proletariat vanguard.

32 See Eugene Wolfenstein, The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X And The Black Revolution (360) in which he argues that if American democracy were less regressive, there would have been no need for a black revolution. See also Cruse, "Post-script on Black Power - The Dialogue between Shadow and Substance", in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (545) 544-567.

In his analysis of the 1963 Birmingham riots,[33] Bennett argues that the overwhelming tension between blacks and whites was brought about by the "monstrous fact: [of] white power" (8) and that consequently "there can be only two basic responses to [ideologically] imposed power: open revolt or accommodation" (9). This he argues resulted in two contradictory impulses within what he describes as the Negro movement - both the need to reject revolt, and the need to reject accommodation.[34] As Bennett perceives the situation, "acceptance, on whatever level, is violation" (10) because it does not sufficiently redress the balance of power relations, but seeks instead to reach a compromise situation. Something which nationalist blacks found untenable.[35]

The "propaganda of enlightenment" (Bennett 10) which sought to bring about peaceful protests, leads Bennett to argue that in itself "protest is not revolt", and Clarke to suggest that the civil rights organisations were never revolutionary and that "they could be considered revolutionary only if one tortures the meaning of the term to imply a demand to include other human beings in a system which promises fulfilment to others" (114). The suggestion here is that a demand for human rights, no matter what strategies are employed to secure those rights, does not in itself constitute a black revolution *per se*. A black revolution in the Jamesian appropriation of the phrase would have required the African-American who was "headed for the proletariat" (187) to overthrow the ideology of white supremacy.[36]

Careful scrutiny and analysis is called for the moment one begins to question how the movement achieved its aims, and on what ground those achievements and aims were granted or won. It is also desirable perhaps to call to attention once more to the assertions made at the beginning of the chapter *vis-à-vis* the emplotment of historical sequences.

If one records and chooses to focus on legislative and statutory reforms as a measure of the success of the so-called revolution, then the historical narrative becomes a cataloguing of dates and data through which one perceives the victory or otherwise of

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33 For a fuller explication of the Birmingham riots, see Lerone Bennett The Negro Mood (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1964) 3-11.

34 Clearly the need to reject revolt refers to the standpoint of the SNCC and the SCLC both of which adopted a non-violent policy.

35 Compromises were seen as tantamount to integration by segregationists and/or those who adopted anti-assimilationist beliefs. I return to this further on in the chapter *vis-à-vis* Harlem in the 1920s. Malcolm X whose political views *did* change over time, argued vociferously against integrationist policies: "The word integration was invented by a Northern liberal ... the truth is 'integration' is an image a ... smokescreen that confuses the true wants of the American blackman," (The Autobiography of Malcolm X 378). For a fuller explication of the debate surrounding integration/assimilation, see Milton M Gordon Assimilation in American Life: Role of Race, Religion and National Origins (New York: Open University Press, 1964).

36 See hooks, "overcoming white supremacy: a comment", in Talking Back in which she argues that the term "white supremacy" adequately speaks to the complicity of both blacks and whites in the construction of racial hierarchies. For hooks, internalised racism becomes one of the legacies of white supremacy (113).

civil rights organisations. The terms of definition for success are reduced in this instance to an either/or categorisation. Thus, Cruse argues that the problems of sub-standard housing in the predominantly black ghettos of Harlem were never fully assuaged, thus pointing to the *failure* of civil rights organisations and/or the revolution for lower-class blacks in the ghettos. Lomax's (1963) view of the events in the 1960s establishes the period historically as one in which the white community "destroyed the Negroes' faith in the basic integrity of the white power structure" (75). This presumes neutral power structures whose integrity is unquestionable and with no ideological interests. Such a view would seem to be politically (and ideologically) naive, as it ignores the fact that "*good white people*['s]" interests (Lomax 74) might be better served by white power structures than by the Black Power movement.

If on the other hand, one challenges the liberal assumption of essentially 'good' people, black or white, along with notions of inherently unbiased and transparent structures of domination, and seeks to examine instead the degree to which black political activism and social transformation were assimilated by and into the status quo, then the perception of the historical narrative must necessarily alter. In this instance the focus of attention broadens to examine not merely the degree of success or otherwise, according to a list of addressed or unaddressed political demands, but what happens "in a white supremacist capitalist, patriarchal state where the mechanisms of co-optation are so advanced, that much that is potentially radical is undermined" (hooks, Talking Back 14). How, for example, do counter organisations, such as the civil rights organisations and/or its leaders who are opposed to white supremacy, make radical political demands when the majority of its board of executives are eminent and powerful white men? Bennett makes the observation that "[t]he Black Establishment, oddly enough, is not all black" (26),[37] and that "[c]ertain positions in the Establishment are ... *reserved* for white men (Bennett 31) (emphasis added).

This would seem to foreclose the possibility of radicalism, since the white Establishment figures, even if they are "righteous white people" (hooks Talking Back 115), would be ideologically implicated in

> a concert ... dominated by a single score, occasionally disturbed by contradiction ... the score of the Ideology of the current ruling class which integrates into its music the great themes of the Humanism of the Great Forefathers, ... who produced the themes of Interest, particular and general, etc. nationalism, moralism, and economism (Althusser 146).

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37 So does Lomax. in The Negro Revolt he advocates the integration of blacks and whites in all institutions. He rejects the idea that the presence of whites in black civil rights organisations leads to "go -slowism", citing CORE as an example of a civil rights organisation "which has a larger contingent of white people and is by far the most militant Negro action group" (180). I find this liberal stance problematic and politically myopic, insofar as it runs the risk again of collapsing blackness into dominant white institutional frameworks resulting in blacks being "misheard" by whites. See June Jordan, "Problems of Language in a Democratic State", in Moving Towards Home: Political Essays 126-135.

Seen from this perspective, it could be argued that the black civil rights organisations were fighting on two contradictory and mutually exclusive fronts (reiterating once again Bennett's assertion made on p38 in this thesis). In the first instance, they were seeking to dismantle the structures of white supremacy and domination while at the same time incorporating into the top ranks of civil rights organisations persons of the very same political and racial grouping that they were seeking to dismantle.[38] For Lomax to speak of the radical nature of CORE becomes irrelevant because effectively it was reproducing, with a white majority, white hegemony. That is to say, the conditions of (white and/or mainstream) production.

This would appear to be a prime example of Althusser's hypothesis on ideology (1971), in which he argues that "no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatus" (Althusser 139). Interestingly, among the institutions he lists as part of the State Ideological Apparatus (hereafter ISA) are "the political ISA (the political system, inc the different parties); the trade-union ISA, the cultural ISA (Literature, the Arts, sports etc), the communication ISA (press, radio, television etc)" (137).

It is precisely the issue around white cultural and political hegemony that appears to have created the major problems and differences between African-Americans who viewed the social upheavals as broadly humanitarian concerns and those who viewed it more specifically as a black nationalist concern. Hypothetically speaking, if blackness as a sign (perhaps "race" is more appropriate here) is removed from the centre stage of the social upheavals, in other words if one re-emplots the main events and construct a narrative that centralises the white power structures as opposed to the black power movement,[39] thereby removing *race as the problem*,[40] then the remainder of the narrative could take on an entirely different emphasis, one not based solely on a class struggle either, but on the ways in which ideology and the political and cultural state apparatuses "exert mutual influence and pressure on one another but also operate with *relative autonomy*".(Allen 168)

Re-(em)plotted this way, it is possible to envisage the degree to which African-Americans negotiated or complied more or less, with the white structures of domination in order to achieve their aims. Here then, the perception of the African-Americans as an

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38 This is not dissimilar to Audre Lorde's argument in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (Sister Outsider 110-113).

39 I am well aware that I run the risk of re-writing or structuring events around a centralised monolithic white and same hegemony, but positionality - which I shall return to in Chapter Three - is crucial for this debate I think. As Peggy Phelan argues, the relationship between visibility and power (non-visibility and therefore disempowerment) is problematic. ("Broken symmetries: memory, sight, love" in Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London: Routledge, 1993) 1-33). Future references to this text will follow the citation.

40 As Louis Gates argues, race in any case is itself a "dangerous trope ... the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its applications" (Writing "Race" and Difference 5).

homogenous group fighting for civil liberties has been fractured in order to foreground the humanitarians (who co-opted white liberals, thereby creating a liberal-humanist coalition) and black nationalists. The liberal-humanists included those who, like Lomax, viewed the events of the 1960s

> as social evolution, a process of change growing out of ethnic groups interacting with one another.... Thus the white man [becomes] but one of the elements involved, just another link in the chain of cause and effect which must remain taut if social change is to be orderly and sure. (178)

The liberal-humanists who were pro-desegregation, included most, if not all of the major civil rights organisations,[41] whose aim was to achieve equal status for the black community by integrating all institutions which thus far operated on a basis not dissimilar to a system of racial apartheid. Desegregation implied full integration of the African-Americans into white American mainstream society. Arguably, for the desegregationist, the issue of desegregation was not only political, it was also a humanitarian cause. Du Bois, leader of the NAACP for thirty years insisted that he was not against any race establishing its own superiority, what he did object to, however, was the abject denial of other races to a similar status. He insisted:

> It is not the positive propaganda of people who believe white blood divine, infallible and holy to which I object. It is the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable, and inspired with new ideals for the world (Lester II 319).

Those in favour of desegregation were not seeking to deny the white population political and socio-economic power, merely their exclusive right to that power, especially since "the political, economical and social system of America was produced from the enslavement of the black [wo/]man". (Autobiography Of Malcolm X 116)[42]

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the leader *par excellence* of the liberal-humanist and integrationist cause because he was able to inspire and arouse the interests of both the black and white communities to the injustice of racism. As a public and political leader, he was an ideal spokesman because of his ability to "articulate a philosophy and ideology of race relations acceptable to the larger society" (Clarke 122). Clarke maintains that his philosophy of love and brotherhood coupled with his inordinate ability to project both his role as minister *and* national leader resulted in "the civil rights

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41 This includes CORE, SNCC, SCLC. See also Alice Walker, Meridian (London: The Women's Press, 1982) in which she fictionalises moments of the 1960s social upheaval. The protagonist, Meridian, becomes an activist when she witnesses the protests of a racially mixed student group (75).

42 This characteristic oversight (ie: addressing racial issues from a specifically male perspective) on the part of black men is dealt with by hooks in Ain't I A Woman. She cites Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammed, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmicheal, as men whose politics are complicit with patriarchal domination. (94); see also 87-177.

movement converg[ing] in his personality" (122). Here then was the wholly "positive" face of the civil rights organisations: non-aggressive, yet determined and eloquent. According to Lomax writing in 1963, King was "the most popular Negro in America today ... " (85), although he questioned whether King's amenability alone was sufficient for the role of the SCLC leadership.

There were other organisations and/or individuals for whom the term 'integration' with all its attendant ideologies was a misnomer[43]. Black nationalists argued instead for separate but equal reforms. Nationalists viewed desegregation and/or integrationism as simply a more subtle, inverted form of racism, which did little more than pay lip-service to the demands of the African-American community. Integration, the nationalists argued, would never guarantee black members of American society racial or socio-economic equality. Furthermore, such a posture could only lead to the erasure of specific cultural and historical differences which, they argued were crucial to the African-American racial identity and heritage. The erasure of this identity would therefore be the same as subordinating African-Americans and African-American identities to an inferior status. African-Americans were Americans only by dint of the fact that they were supplanted from the homeland in Africa by white colonisers. Therefore, they argued, the natural birthplace of all blacks was Africa.[44]

In opposition to this, integrationists have argued that the African-American after four centuries of slavery was a naturalised American citizen. While acknowledging the importance of not denying African-Americans their cultural and historical heritage in a predominantly white society, they also pointed to the fact that a separate but equal agenda would not guarantee equality between the races, because the black community was not in a position, either economically or politically to create its own nationalist state. The priority for the integrationist was to see both constitutional and democratic

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43 For example Cruse, see The Crisis of The Negro Intellectual, see also The Autobiography of Malcolm X

44 The Black Muslims also known as the Nation of Islam were led by the Honourable Elijah Muhammed and were an established black nationalist movement during the period under discussion. The movement came to prominence when Malcolm X joined them. Milton M Gordon in Assimilation In American Life describes the Black Muslims as a movement that stressed "an extreme form of Negro communal separation ... and identity with the peoples of Asia and Africa" (15); H R Issacs The New World Of Negro Americans (London: Phoenix House, 1963) notes that the dispossessed people assuage their alienation by engaging with "cult" groups. "Two generations ago they turned in great number ... to Marcus Garvey's dream promise of escape to Africa ... the most newly successful ... is Elijah Muhammed's Black Muslim Movement, which is oriented not toward ancestral Africa but toward a vaguely neo-Islamic or pseudo-Islamic tradition which has been present for a long time as a distinct strand in Negro cultism (333-334); see also 335-8. For a more detailed and less antagonistic assessment of Malcolm X's political rhetoric see John Illo "Malcolm X: The Age of Guns and Rhetoric" in Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century 281-293; specifically on black Nationalism see G D Jaynes and R M Williams, Jr (ed.) Blacks and American Society (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1989) 218-230; E U Essien-Udom Black Nationalism: A Search For Identity In America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962)

rights extended to all members of society, regardless of their colour. These two points represented opposing debates within the black civil rights movement.

However, the *realpolitik* of this debate went much further than the clear and precise split based on nationalist and integrationist policies that has been outlined here. The civil rights organisations were also power bases or establishments which attracted funds through membership and sponsorship. Large donations were secured from corporations and foundations which were headed by eminent and powerful white male figures in the community. At the height of the social upheaval in 1964, the Urban League organisation received "several donations of $50,000 ... and foundations have given as much as $150,000" (Clarke 128). In the same year, the income for the NAACP totalled $1,116,654.19 This financial aid was crucial to the survival of the organisations, along with membership figures. It points to the intractable relationship between politics and economics and is crucial for an understanding of the policies of the organisations.

In his assessment of Establishment individuals Bennett argues that the criteria for membership were not based on wealth alone but on the number of boards of which the Establishment woman or man was a member: "It is a group of Negroes *and whites* who command the powerlines *in* the Negro community" (26). Thus the civil rights organisations were for the most part integrated from the top of the organisational hierarchy right down to their membership. Within this political structure, it was illogical to employ the philosophy of the nationalists, because, according to Althusser, as an ISA, its function would be to reproduce a particular ideology, one in keeping, if not with white hegemony, then with a more liberal ideology; and to reproduce that ideology "in the way proper to it" (Althusser 146).[45] Furthermore, black Establishment men shared a common educational background with their white counterparts and this is significant, because schools, have a dominant role in reproducing ruling class ideology. This Althusser views as all the more effective, if not the most effective of the ISAs, because the school is perceived as "a neutral environment purged of ideology" (148). Therefore it becomes easier according to Althusser to reproduce the necessary "know-how wrapped in the ruling ideology". Thus:

> Du Bois' ideology of the Talented Tenth, sent forth leaders with a rather aristocratic and not altogether realistic concept of *noblesse oblige* - men who felt that they were responsible for the masses and discharged that responsibility at a safe distance.(Bennett 42)

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45 Louis Althusser, "Ideology And The Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards Investigation)" in Althusser - Lenin And Philosophy And Other Essays trans. Ben Brewster (London NLB, 1971) 123-173. Althusser makes the distinction between the RSA (Repressive State Apparatus) and the ISA. The former "functions massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology. The ISA functions massively and predominantly by ideology but they also function secondarily by repression" 138

A coterie of Establishment figures thus tended to be the actual controllers of the organisation, and frequently the organisations dependened on the Establishment for funding and sponsorship had no choice but to accede to the "donors program" (Bennet 35) if they wanted the continuing and vital financial support of the donor. When one considers that certain board positions in the NAACP were reserved exclusively for white Establishment men, an understanding is gained of what the limitations and boundaries might have been *vis-à-vis* the political strategies and tactics of the organisation in its goal of racial equality. The fact that most NAACP and Urban League activists came from prominent educated families[46] pales into insignificance alongside Bennett's point that by 1965 when civil rights action had reached fever pitch, none of the "Negro institutions of power [had ever] had a Negro president or a Negro treasurer". He concedes that "final control (chairman of the board) and financial control (treasurer and chairman on the financial and investment committees) are generally invested in white hands" (Bennett 31).

Ironically then, it could be argued that the black civil rights movement of the 1960s was directed by a liberal-humanist urge that inadvertently collapsed specific black political concerns into a white mainstream interests and by implication, a dominant repressive ideology. At grass roots level black national leaders earned their popularity and respect, but essentially they were still only operating at the level of middle management. The real direction and politics of the movement came from the apex of the institutional hierarchy. These institutions, it should be stressed were not independent autonomous bodies, but linked; firstly through politico-economical dependency and secondly through the ISA. Civil rights organisations, no matter how militant a vanguard for the African-Americans, were always framed and regulated by ideological appellations which continued to allow African-Americans a narrow position from which to negotiate - even within their own organisations founded for their own specific political and racial purposes. The nationalist critique of the integrationist position was not so unrealistic after all. In articulating an anti-integrationist stance, they were merely reiterating an institutional and ideological inevitability that had already occurred throughout civil rights organisations.

In acknowledging these facts, it cannot be concluded that the civil rights movement was either successful unsuccessful. Following on from Bennets observations

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46 Clarke makes a distinction between the SNCC uniform of blue denims and "the neat white shirt and tie and Ivy League jacket of the Urban League". (109) Ivy League being the conglomerate of traditional, American universities on a par with Oxford and Cambridge in Britain, for example the Universities of Yale and Harvard. See also Willard B Gatewood Aristocrats of Color in which Gatewood cites a number of "coloured aristocrats" who were active in the civil rights organisation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries 300-322; also Bennett who explains that "[a] common educational background links the power structure. A significantly large percentage of top-level leadership has come from Ivy League colleges. Many more, however, came from a handful of Negro colleges which form a sub-Ivy League." (41)

of Establishment politics, one could argue that the organisations, born out of the civil rights movement, were "policed" by liberal white Establishment figures descended from Ivy League universities around the United States. Dr King's philosophy of love and "turning the other cheek"- a posture which was held to be utterly pointless and contemptible by nationalist figure Malcolm X - was, in the context of the movement as a whole, an advocation of liberalism. The non-violent protests and peaceful demonstrations which he often led as the progenitor of the SCLC were a testimony to his own philosophy. It was Dr. King who during the Montgomery bus boycott of 1954 popularised the sit-in/stand-in, which involved occupying the offensive territory. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), though apparently militant, also observed the peaceful form of protest advanced by King, and in 1964 when locals threatened to "stall-in" at the New York World Fair, Clarke reports that James Farmer, the executive director of CORE, allowed himself to be arrested in order to divert attention away from the unruly protesters. While it was inevitable that public disorder and violence would result in extreme policing and physical brutality, it is doubtful whether peaceful protests had the same impact as revolts. However Clarke argues that "[t]o the Negro, white irritation and anger is at least a *response*. And where chaos threatens, more respectable leaders of society intervene.... There is no evidence that whites react to philosophy, but they do react to what happens" (120-121) The danger here is that "white irritation and anger" does not guarantee a resolution of the conflicts. Secondly on the evidence of the arguments above, the so-called "more responsible leaders of society", that is the Establishment figures, often advised the civil rights leaders to contain any possibilities of violent protests and recalcitrant elements in the first place.This point is clarified by Malcom X in his autobiograhy (as told to Alex Haley).

He recounts with wry humour, the protest March organised by Asa Philip Randolph in 1941. Randolph planned to march on Washington with "thousands of black brothers ... demanding of the Congress and the White House some concrete civil rights action". (385) According to his narrative version of the events, in order to halt the impact and anger of thousands of African-Americans, civil rights leaders were asked to stop the March, but since it had not been organised by any of their organisations, (it was a spontaneous reaction to persistent racial oppression), the so-called leaders were powerless. Operating in a manner that speaks to the political deftness of the ISA, the "White House, with a fanfare of international publicity, 'approved', 'endorsed', and 'welcomed' a March on Washington"(386). Charting the events as they occurred, Malcolm X describes the way in which $800,000 was donated (at this time) to a United Civil Rights Leadership council with a promise of another generous donation "after the March ... obviously if all went well" (386). This was the incentive for the Civil Rights Leaders to at least attempt to keep the African-American thousands calm, even if they

had no direct role in the organisation of the March. Having offered the civil rights leaders such a vast sum of money, with the promise of more, they were now able to manoeuvre the March in a number of ways in order to diffuse the potentially explosive situation. Firstly, Malcolm X explains, the "'angry blacks'" were incensed by the fact that "[m]assive international publicity projected the `big six' [civil rights leaders] as the March on Washington leaders". The six became ten when "four famous white public figures: one Catholic, one Jew, one Protestant, and one labor boss" were invited to join the March. It was advertised as a public demonstration for all, with the big ten "'supervis[ing]'" the March. "The word spread fast among so-called 'liberal(s)' ... it was 'democratic' to join this black March. And suddenly, the previously March-nervous whites began announcing *they* were going" (386-7), with the result that

> Any rickety carloads of angry, dusty, sweating small-town Negroes would have gotten lost among the chartered jet planes, railroad cars, and air-conditioned buses. What originally was planned to be an angry riptide, one English newspaper aptly described now as `the gentle flood' ... The marchers had been instructed to bring no signs - signs were provided. They had been told how to arrive, *when*, where to arrive, *where* to assemble, when to *start* marching, the *route* to march ... even where to *faint!* ... I observed the circus. Who ever heard of angry revolutionists all harmonizing 'We Shall Overcome ... Suum [*sic*] Day.' (387)

This ironic "emplotment" of the March on Washington speaks directly to the interlocking nature of "economic, political and ideological practice" (White "IA" 168) and serves to reinforce the Althusserian notion of ideology and its attendant state apparatuses. For if, as Althusser argues, "what seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise in the street), in reality takes place in ideology" (163), then the liberal-humanists of the civil rights movement and organisations were always - even in protest - working, or fighting towards sets of irreducible or irradicable contradictions. In one sense they were fighting *against* racial discrimination and segregation in order to eradicate the status of African-American women and men as racially and therefore unequivocally inferior. In doing so however, they were also demanding that they be recognised as ideologically constituted subjects, that is to say as subjects who were a part of the white hegemonic system they were attempting to overthrow. This is in keeping with the Althusserian notion of ideology and subjectivity, in which

> ideology 'acts' or functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals ... or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects ... by that very precise operation ... called *interpellation* or hailing" (Althusser 163).

Seen this way, Malcolm X's perception of "angry revolutionaries harmonising" to Judeo-Christian hymns is less astonishing than he thinks, if one acknowledges that ideology works to totalize or *integrate* social formations. For, as Althusser states:

1. there is no practice [or protest] except by and in an ideology;

2. there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subjects (159).

II African-American Cultural Production in the 1920s

In keeping with the ideas expounded in the introduction to this chapter, this section examines African-American cultural production in the period that historically has been designated as the Harlem Renaissance. Where the previous section attempted to re-plot the historical events of the 1960s by re-positioning and re-constructing various events and "facts" in order to re-assess the relationship between black political activism and white dominant ideology, here the aim is to assess to what extent African-American cultural production in the 1920s underwent a similar process of assimilation. Arguably, an important legacy of the Harlem Renaissance is the cultural forms and products which emerged from the period. This is not to suggest that the most important dramatic (and/or literary) works emerged at that time. Rather that insofar as the period was and is characterised as the era of the "New Negro,"[47] it is also characterised by a number of literary and dramatic texts by African-American women and men whose work would seem to constitute a black literary canon. This had led to a continuous reassessment of the works that emerged at that time hence the acknowledgement of a cultural renaissance.[48]

In his preface to Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance (1987) Houston A Baker observes that generally the modernist period is characterised as that moment when specifically Anglo-British, Irish and American literary writers emerged, and took

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47 The 'New Negro' was the collective name given to the predominantly literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1925 Alain Locke, one of the artistic progenitors of the Harlem Renaissance, edited an anthology of writing by New Negroes entitled The New Negro: An Interpretation. It drew attention to the cultural developments that were taking place in Harlem and articulated a very specific form of black folk expression and self-determination. Locke viewed Harlem as being as central to the New Negro as Prague was to the New Czechoslovakia.

48 One could argue for the "classic" or canonical status of the following in terms of their racial and/or gender concerns for the African-American reader: Alain Locke, The New Negro; James Weldon Johnson, Along this Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson (New York: Viking Penguin 1933); James W Johnson, Black Manhattan: The American Negro, His History And Literature; Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937; London: Virago, 1986); Nella Larsen, Quicksand (New York: Knopf 1928) and Passing (New York: Knopf, 1928); Alice Walker's expedition to lay a gravestone on Hurston's previously unmarked grave has contributed to a reconsideration of Hurston's writing by black feminist scholars. See "Looking for Zora", in In Search of Our Mothers' Garden. Here Walker describes her quest to find Hurston's gravestone and thereby reinstate her within the African-American literary canon.

precedence on the literary (modernist) stage. As a direct consequence of this, he argues that the Harlem Renaissance tends not, to be associated with modernism *per se* but is instead observed and/or defined in relation to the Anglo-British, Irish and American categorisation. Rejecting this standpoint as the only way in which to come to an understanding of the renaissance, he suggests that

> judgements on Afro-American 'modernity' and the 'Harlem Renaissance' that begin with notions of British, Anglo-American, and Irish 'modernism' as 'successful' objects, projects and processes to be emulated by Afro-American are misguided (xv).

Alice Walker in In Search of Our Mothers' Garden (1983) observes that Virgina Woolf's insistence that a woman must have five hundred pounds and a room of her own in order to write pertains only to those who already own themselves;[49] while Baker (1987) furthers Walker's argument by insisting that

> In 'diasporic', 'developing', `Third World', 'emerging' ... nations or territories there is no need to pose, ironical ... questions such as Are we happy? Are we content? Are we free? [since] [s]uch questions presuppose at least an adequate level of sustenance and a sufficient faith in human behavioral alternatives to enable a self-directed questioning. In other words, without food for thought, all modernist bets are off. (7)

What Walker and Baker attempt to demonstrate in not dissimilar ways is the need for a re-assessment of the African-American canon in general and the Harlem Renaissance in particular; not in relation to the Anglo-American and Irish modernist canon, but relative to the socio-economic and cultural restrictions that may have served as an imposition or restriction on the writer *and* the time in which s/he was writing or performing.[50] In short, both scholars call for historicist revisionist methods for assessing the African-American cultural renaissance and forms of productions.[51]

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49 Here she is referring to the slave girl Phillis Wheately who in 1772 underwent an oral examination conducted by eighteen eminent citizens of the town, to determine whether or not she was the real author of a series of poems written in English. For further essays on Wheatley, see C W E Bigsby, The Second Renaissance (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980) 257-302; June Jordan Moving Towards Home 161-172; Houston A Baker The Journey Back (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 6-15. Henry Louis Gates Jr., Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial Self (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 61-79. Future pages references to this text will follow the citation.

50 See for example, The Autobiography of Billie Holiday (New York: Doubleday & Co. 1956) in which she describes having to sleep in the tour bus at the apex of her career, especially when she sang in Southern states of American. This because hotels were segregated She also describes having to enter through the back door as opposed to the front with the white members of her band. Given this historical reality, it would be ludicrous to assess Holiday's success by comparing her to a white female jazz singer of the period.

51 They are not alone in this. See by way of example other black intellectuals such as June Jordan "White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation" 29-41 in which she argues that black people must define themselves in terms of their own socio-political and cultural objectives; bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional", in Yearning: Race Gender and Cultural Politics (London: Turnaround, 1991) 103-115 in which she discusses the need to see

More recent trends in cultural and literary disciplines have resulted in varying interpretations, not only in terms of *what* actually constituted the Harlem Renaissance, and whether or not it was a success, but also in terms of *when* it began. In his introduction to The Second Renaissance, C W E Bigsby suggests that "the first Black Renaissance (formerly called the Harlem Renaissance or the Negro Renaissance) can, with some confidence, be confined to a decade beginning in the mid-1920s" (3) and was "marked by an abrupt end" in the 1930s (266). Hazel Carby, in Reconstructing Womanhood, offers a less rigidly defined time-span, suggesting only that the period might best be categorised by the "years between the end of world war one and the depression".[52] Baker, however, in an ironic response to "features of art and writing that began to predominate (by Virginia Woolf's timeline) on or about December 1910" (3), suggests instead that a "discursive constellation ... [of] Afro-American literature, music, art, design and intellectual history ... occurred on or about September 18 1895" (8).

This is a deliberate attempt, by way of conflicting secondary sources to complicate, or destabilise a set of historical givens for the Harlem renaissance in order to highlight the fact that each of the scholars mentioned has come to his or her conclusion only by prescribing selected characteristics to an historical "space of sufficient identity", so that each individual historical narrative has become "caught up in the play of representing differences through identities which differ from each other"[53] (Cousins 128). Since there appear to be a number of variables with regard to when the movement started and/or ended, it is perhaps not unfeasible to also suggest that those cultural elements that characterised the Harlem movement as a new age for African-American art were only renaissant insofar as they offered to the white mainstream cultural world a view of black art that hitherto had been submerged by an ideology that was hegemonically "murderous, white ... and exclusionary" (Baker 85). In other words, the Harlem movement might be viewed as a renaissance only because the New Negro chose to *re*-present "no single ideology ... but a new confidence, a lack of apology and a positive assertion of cultural values ... which drew on black modes [of representation]" (Bigsby 260).

Interestingly, this description forms a direct contrast to the modernist traditions that Baker characterises as Anglo-American and British; and might be seen as at least one of the reasons why the work of African-Americans acquired status within the mainstream dominant culture at this point.[54] This does not, however, negate the fact that

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"darkness differently, to talk about in a new way" (113). Future references to this text will follow the citation.

52 Hazel Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist. New York: Open University Press, 1987. 75

53 This does not depart from Hayden White's assertion that the construction of the historical narrative entails the selection of certain events which are emplotted at the expense of others.

54 This point bears further scrutiny. In Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, Baker argues for the difficulty or improbability of an African-American student (like himself), finding "intimacy" in the

a flourishing of African-American cultural forms occurred sometime in the mid-twenties. It merely points to the arbitrary nature of encoding it as a success, a failure, or even a renaissance and consequently it might be more realistic to view the whole movement as a specific moment in African-American history that surfaced and impinged on, and/or influenced, notions of cultural production in America at a time when the white modernist tradition was constructing "a prototypical form [that was] exclusively Western, preeminently bourgeois and optically white" (Baker 6).

In The Crisis of The Negro Intellectual, Cruse conducts a Marxist historical analysis of African-American socio-cultural and politico-economic activity over a sixty-year period.[55] Writing retrospectively, he observes that the Harlem renaissance was not in itself particularly unique. For Cruse, the uniqueness of the movement lay in the fact that "it ran almost parallel to and in interaction with a white American cultural resurgence" (Cruse 22) in Greenwich Village. He situates this ethnic and aesthetic interaction historically and views it as an "historical motif of ... Negro dynamics [which] were acting and reacting within the context of Negro-white relations ... but on a

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moderns' perception of a Sisyphean and hostile world (6). Might it not then be feasible to suggest - at the risk of constricting my argument to a reductive binary reasoning, that the inverse was the case with the Anglo-American moderns; ie, they sought cultural refuge in a tradition that was re-emerging, self-directed, and "exotic", insofar as the focus of the movement was the re-assertion of its African Heritage. The Autobiography of Malcolm X substantiates this latter point, with Malcolm X's observation that in twenties and thirties Harlem, "when the downtown nightclubs had closed, most of these Harlem places [bars] crawled with white people. These whites were just mad for Negro 'atmosphere', especially some of the places that had what you might call Negro *soul*. Sometimes Negroes would talk about how a lot of whites seemed unable to have enough of being close around us, and among us - in groups. Both white men and women, it seemed, would get almost mesmerised by Negroes" (181). For a more contemporary observation of a similar phenomenon, see hooks, Black Looks 157-165.

55 Harold Cruse is not the only historian to have undertaken detailed observations and analyses of African-American political and/or cultural history. However, his critique of African-American cultural production over a fifty-year period forms the mainstay in this section of the chapter because he also examines the 1920s and 1960s; two culturally renaissant eras in African-American history. Other historians, both black and white have also undertaken to examine African-American history in the twentieth century. They do not all, however, give the same focus to black cultural production in America. Other twentieth century historians who have undertaken encyclopaedic inquiries into African-American history include: W.E.B. Du Bois, "a man driven to the encyclopaedic recording of the social history of black folk." (Wilson 87) See by way of example: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black People Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935); Crisis journal of which Du Bois as the editor for twenty-five years between 1910 and 1934, "produc[ing] a magazine that ranks among the most important organs of protest ever published in the United States." (Wilson 92). Other historians include: Herbert Apthker: American Negro Slave Revolts (New York: International Publishers, 1970); Anti-Racism in United States History: The First Two Hundred Years, (London: Praeger, 1993); The Negro in the Abolitionist Movement, (New York: International Publishers, 1941); John Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Open University Press, 1972), John Blassingame and Mary F Berry, Long Memory: The Black Experience in America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Edward Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, (ed) (New York: Citadel Press, 1951) Eugene Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll: The World The Slaves Made, From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World (London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

cultural plane" (Cruse 22). While he does not suggest that this is particularly problematic in itself, he voices concern over his belief that this framework became the sole *modus operandi* for most, if not all, African-American nationalist issues.

The central premise of Cruse's analysis of the renaissance centres on his questioning the "achievement of cultural integration ... and the way that integration is being pursued", (Cruse 69), along with (as he perceives it) the subsequent failure of the movement because of it integrationist zeal. Yet in keeping with Hayden White's notion of the "proper historian", he tends to "construct [his] facts as though they were 'given' and refuse[s] to recognise ... that they are not so much found as constructed by the *kinds of questions* which he asks of the phenomena before him" (White 43). By way of example: he describes the Greenwich Village renaissance of 1912, as having procured "the rare guidance and sponsorship of a patroness with a very broad and cultivated background in the person of Mabel Dodge" (24).[56] He compares her to a similar figurehead in the Harlem movement - A'Lelia Walker, the daughter of Madame C J Walker[57] and points to the fact that A'Lelia Walker was not "an heiress of old" and neither an "upper class white", but the daughter of a black bourgeois. In juxtaposing the two women and positing Dodge as the criterion (he describes Walker as the "nearest approach to the Salon Lady produced by the Harlem Renaissance" (24)) for leadership of a literary renaissance, he can be accused of setting up the white Greenwich movement leader as the standard against which to measure the Harlem movement leader. Since this comparison occurs at the beginning of his encyclopaedic enquiry, it would not be unfeasible to suggest that a myopic form of comparison shapes and limits his investigation throughout. This same point is raised by Baker (1987) when he argues that "to ask why the renaissance failed is to agree at the very outset that the 1920s did not have profoundly beneficient effects for areas of African-American discourse that we have only recently began to explore in depth" (12). For Baker, "it is an unfortunate result of disciplinary control and power politics" (13) that results in African-American scholars devoting "three hundred pages to proving the 'failure' of a movement that in the eyes of white America could never have been a success - precisely because it was 'African-America'"[58] (Baker 13) His insistence that it would be difficult to imagine Anglo-American or British scholars committing the same amount of rigour to an

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56 Mabel Dodge was hostess and patroness of the Greenwich Village movement. See Cruse 22-32.

57 Madame C J Walker became the first African-American millionairess in commercial business. She built her business on the cosmetic requirements of black women in the United States and the West Indies. (See James W Johnson, Black Manhattan 282).

58 In Black Manhattan, Johnson reports that the critics of Salome (1923) and The Comedy of Errors (1923) - both of which formed part of the repertoire for The Ethiopian Players - were inclined to agree that the third play in the repertoire, The Chip Woman's Fortune, was an infinitely better show. According to Johnson, the critics felt that however well Negroes might perform white classics, "it was doubtful if they could be so interesting as they would be in Negro plays, if were they be interesting at all" (191).

assessment of the "failure" of modernism, is an interesting point in the context of the Harlem renaissance

What Cruse fails to recognise are the political, cultural and social differences and exigencies that existed amongst the New Negroes, and also the fact that while the movement failed, in his assessment, to reproduce a Mabel Dodge equivalent, this may have been due to the fact that it did not constitute itself solely in terms of a hierarchy with an obvious "leader". Added to this, the chances of an African-American woman being granted the same status as Mabel Dodge within a movement - that, as Cruse points out, became increasingly multi-racial - would have been difficult.[59]

Cruse himself analyses Dodge's racist stances, relative to her sympathy for the Native American Indian. Thus while the bohemian faction of the Greenwich Village movement were able to perceive a woman as their patroness in Mabel Dodge, she herself was "rather unwilling ... to permit the first Negroes to attend one of her famous artists' soirees" (Cruse 27). Her reflections on "an appalling Negress [who] danced before us" (27) surely lay claim to just one of the reasons why the socio-cultural criteria for the African-American in the early part of the twentieth century cannot be contingent on criteria that are ideologically implicated by the Anglo-American culture.

The fact is that the Harlem Renaissance was not a cohesive and unified African-American movement, but rather, like the civil rights organisation of the 1950s and 1960s, it demonstrated differences within the movement, ones that pointed to a cultural movement in process. It is the process of selecting and constructing a narrative that includes an "individuation of thought and feeling" (Hemenway 35) which will ultimately contribute to an historicisation of an era that was both fragmented (insofar as it acknowledged individual differences) and whole (insofar as there was a perception of a general increase in African-American cultural activity in the 1920s).

Differences at the level of cultural and political interests were not confined to the individual members alone. The dramatic arts also demonstrated differences within the general project of African-American self-determination and expression. Theatres for example, developed national and international reputations, which came about as a result of the performances (and/or performers) that were staged. The Cotton Club, which tended to host revues and jazz bands, was in essence a night-club. It became the training ground for black and white actors who would later move on to work on musicals downtown on Broadway (Johnson 179). Broadway and clubs which produced revues

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59 It would be ludicrous in the extreme to suggest that the Harlem Renaissance resulted in the social and/or political emancipation of African-Americans, despite their increased cultural status. Lynching increased after World War I and the interlocking nature of racism and sexism ensured that African-American women were not accorded the social status of white women. See Angela Davis, Women Race and Class 70-86 and 172-201.

might be viewed as the mainstream element of theatre in twenties Harlem. In contrast, the Off-Broadway theatres consisted largely of smaller theatres in New York that hosted musical as well as non-musical productions such as melodramatic and "serious" plays.[60]

In his historical biography of Harlem, Black Manhattan (1930), James Weldon Johnson distinguishes between the downtown Broadway theatres, which between 1910 and 1917 were exclusive to white audiences, and Negro theatres which emerged as a result of the racial ban. The cultural exclusion of African-Americans from downtown Broadway is, by negative definition, an example of the way in which racial segregation can positively enable the so-called oppressed group to define itself without recourse to cultural and/or racial censorship. Johnson, for example, argues that once Jim Crowism had forced the black theatre audiences and dramatists into Harlem,"[the Negro actor] found himself freed from a great many restraints and taboos that had cramped him for forty years "(171).[61] This freedom resulted in African-American theatrical endeavours that, in the light of white political and cultural hegemony were crucial to "the entire history of the Negro in American Theatre"[62] (Johnson 175).

The Lafayette and Lincoln theatres were the two venues according to Johnson that between 1910 and the World War One sought to actively promote and/or engage with a specifically black actor, spectator, producer, playwright and director.

For Cruse, however, there were a series of inconsistencies which, he argues, only served to undermine whatever progress the African-American actor was able to make. Broadly speaking he divides his arguments into three categories: cultural, socio-political, and economic. His first criticism of the movement resides in the fact that despite the success of the Lafayette and Lincoln theatres and their racially specific policies, along with the African-American's brilliance in the musical-comedy genre, the movement as a whole did not produce a single black playwright of any note. Criticising Johnson and other Harlem intellectuals for the lack of a solid cultural/political philosophy for the renaissance, Cruse concludes that "*without Negro playwrights, there*

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60 I offer a detailed discussion of Broadway, Off-Broadway productions and African-American stock/travelling theatre companies in the following chapter. At this juncture I am more concerned to highlight those dramatic endeavours that foregrounded black cultural production in the mid-1920s

61 Jim Crowism became the euphemism for the system of racial segregation. Thus Jim Crow sections of trains restaurants and so on were reserved strictly for the white community. For a fuller history of Jim Crow see C Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow (New York. Oxford University Press, 1974).

62 Johnson cites numerous theatrical events and their significance or otherwise for the African-American in the theatre. For example, he claims historic status for three-one act plays that were written by Ridgely Torrence and performed at the Garden Theatre, in Madison Square Gardens, in 1917 primarily because "[i]t was the first time any where in the United States for Negro actors in the dramatic theatre to command the serious attention of the critics and of the general press and public" (175). He also saw as historically important Charles Gilpin's 1920 performance of the Emperor in Eugene O'Neill's expressionist classic The Emperor Jones (London: Jonathan Cape, 1922).

can be no true Negro ethnic theater ... [a]nd without an ethnic theatre, how can there be a cultural renaissance?" (37) Linked to his view that the absence of a cultural philosophy resulted in the failure of the renaissance is his belief that "the Harlem renaissance became partially smothered in the guilty, idealistic, or egotistical interventions of cultural paternalism", something he found typical of "NAACP interracialism", extended by [James Weldon] Johnson from the politics of the civil rights to the politics of culture" (38). He also located an economic inconsistency, with regard to the Harlem movement.

In the 1920s, Leo-Brecher and Frank Schiffman took control of the Harlem vaudeville and movie houses. The Lafayette theatre came under the aegis of their ownership and administration. Detailing the "Lafayette Theater struggle", (77)[63] which culminated in a series of strikes by black camera operators, Cruse points to the way in which both the black bourgeoisie and the Harlem intelligentsia failed to recognise the necessity of strident economic nationalism in order to maintain a cultural nationalism. *In toto*, Cruse argues that the Harlem intelligentsia and the aspiring black bourgeois class, failed to "comprehend the strategic importance of the cultural front in relation to the political and economic front"(92). Consequently, according to Cruse the black bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia of the Harlem renaissance clung to the naive assumption that "equality in the economic sphere [could] be won through a voluntary sharing of the wealth" (80), profits that were accumulated from African-American theatres. Cruse extends the three major criticisms cited above, to the Harlem movement as a whole, arguing that "whatever the organizational formula, the basic ingredients must be a synthesis of politics, economics and culture"(71).

Cruse's criticisms, though salient, are also limited insofar as his Marxist position seems to limit his perception to viewing the movement as a unitary whole. He completely overlooks the fact that there were individual members of the renaissance who worked against the notion of the intelligentsia and bourgeois identification.[64] In other words, he begins by assuming that the Harlem renaissance movement was a unified cultural phenomenon which was organised in the manner of a political party. His belief that there can be no cultural renaissance without black playwrights, is characteristic of his perception of the renaissance as a monolithic cultural vanguard which failed because it lacked certain economic, political and cultural bases. It needs to be stressed that it is not his criticism of the movement's political naiveté that is being queried here, rather his own view of the movement. Arguably, if he chooses to view the renaissance as a monolithic construction that was politically cogent, it is inevitable that his critique leads him to focus on the political and economic naiveté of the movement.

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63 Cruse gives details of the Lafayette strike which resulted in camera operators picketing in protest at racial discrimination 73-81.

64 Such as Zora Neale Hurston for example. See n75

However, if the historian should choose instead to examine the movement as cultural fragments (identities) that occupied different spaces, or positions within the same renaissance arena, then perhaps the subsequent analysis needs to look, not to the movement as a whole, but instead to the ways in which, to quote Hemenway, "individuation" or different approaches to cultural forms emerged in order to challenge or offer alternative perceptions of cultural production from an African-American perspective.

In Black Manhattan Johnson points to the fact that the Harlem renaissance, despite appearances to the contrary, did not suddenly appear instantaneously and neither did the "New Negro". Instead he explains that the Harlem creative artist underwent a process of re-developing folk art: "sacred music: the Spirituals ... secular music: the plantation songs, rag-time, blues, jazz and the work songs; ... folklore" (260). In other words, the "New Negro" of the twenties sought to reassert cultural forms that went back "more than two hundred and fifty years" (261). In terms of the contributions made by African-Americans to theatre, one could view the developments as being just as important, precisely because of the social and political conditions that black actors and actresses were obliged to tolerate. Notwithstanding Cruse's assertion that there was no firm cultural philosophy and an over-zealous desire to become integrated into the white American theatrical tradition, it might be interesting to examine more closely the cultural hegemony that the "New Negro" in theatre was attempting to overcome and to a certain degree succeeded in overcoming.

Johnson points out that for over forty years, before the establishment of Negro theatres, the Negro performer was obliged to adhere to set racially specific rules which became ingrained as taboos. In all those years s/he was constrained to do a many things that were distasteful because managers felt they would please white folks. Likewise s/he was forbidden to do some other things because managers feared they would displease white folk (171). According to Johnson, the most pervasive taboo was linked to what he terms "romantic love-making": any scene that showed African-American actors in a sexual and/or romantic light.

> The reason behind this taboo lay in the belief that a love scene between two Negroes could not strike a white audience except as ridiculous ... Negroes cannot be supposed to mate romantically, but do so in some sort of minstrel fashion or in some more primeval manner than white people (171).

If however a romantic scene was integral to the play and therefore could not be omitted, it had to be comically subverted to the extent that it became burlesque. It follows that if what has been censored is able to re-emerge in the same social context, in its original form, as opposed to through a process of subversion, then the changes that have been

wrought in order for it to occur as common-place have effected a radical political and cultural change. Johnson notes that in 1913 it was Darktown Follies at the Lafayette theatre that broke the taboo attached to African-American sexuality in the theatre. A musical comedy, "it punctuated the beginning of the nightly migration to Harlem in search of entertainment" (174). He argues that it was the "impassioned manner" in which the Negro tenor sang to the "bronze soubrette" that demonstrated the end of the taboo with regards to African-Americans performing "lovemaking" in the theatre. While Cruse might argue that this does not engage with the crucial issues of economics, politics and culture and might suggest that such short term gains are relevant only to the bourgeois identified, it nevertheless points to the fact that social and racial barriers and cultural prejudices were being eroded.

Darktown Follies was not the only play to push past existing prejudices in the theatre. Johnson (1930) cites April 5 1917, as "the most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in the American theatre" (175) when The Rider of Dreams, Granny Maumee, Simon the Cyrenian, three one-act plays written by the white playwright Ridgely Torrence, were staged at the Garden Theatre in Madison Square Garden.[65] According to Johnson, the plays were important because they finally dispelled the myth of the Negro actor as limited in his skills and histrionic in his performance. Johnson does not seem overly perturbed by the fact that the Negro themes and content were written by a white playwright and produced by a white woman, Miss Emilie Hapgood. Cruse however takes severe exception to the fact that "the first successful and original dramas on Negro life were written and produced by whites ... and not in Harlem, but downtown on Broadway" (79). Yet elsewhere in The Crisis of The Negro Intellectual, he demonstrates his admiration for Emilie Hapgood, arguing that "women like ... Mabel Dodge and Emilie Hapgood, have no place of honor in American cultural history - which says much about the intellectual sickness of this society ... they were *bona fide* pioneers of a kind" (61).

On the one hand, Cruse seems to blame those he calls the Harlem intelligentsia for allowing themselves to be patronised by members of the Greenwich movement, yet he himself cannot disguise his own admiration for them.[66] What he seems to ignore is the fact that Torrence's plays served to banish other racist stereotypes about the Negro actor. The Negro performer was seen as possessing a limited performance vocabulary and therefore only able to perform adequately in musicals and/or musical comedies. In

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65 The trilogy was performed by the Colored Players in 1917 and produced by Mrs Emilie Hapgood. Hapgood was a member of the Greenwich Village movement and established the Hapgood Colored Players. I discuss the Colored Players and the Torrence trilogy within a broader theatrical context in Chapter Two.

66 There is a contradiction here I think on Cruse's part which makes one wonder whether he himself was not looking to the Harlem intelligentsia to establish itself culturally (i.e. in terms of African-American cultural forms and modes of production), or construct itself in a manner not dissimilar to the Greenwich movement.

the Torrence trilogy however, Johnson notes that "the popular idea that Negroes ... simply walk out on the stage and act"(178) was smashed[67]. In other words, at a time in which there was a ban imposed on African-Americans, barring them from attending performances downtown on Broadway, the Negro performer was undergoing a process of re-creation, and demonstrating that s/he had a genuine place on the legitimate stage (Johnson 179). In this instance, it seems more important to prioritise the achievement of the Negro actor, rather than the fact that it was written and produced by members of the Greenwich intelligentsia, not, in a way that speaks to a positive discriminatory approach, but because the actors brought about other ways of viewing the Negro actor. Arguably, without this landmark achievement on the part of the actor, without the recognition that the theatre can enable a re-presenting, or re-fashioning of the African-American self as constructed by the dominant white section of a racist society, all the successful performances on Broadway and within Negro Theatre would have continued to be musical comedies.[68] However, this was not the case. While musicals such as Shuffle Along (1921) and Runnin' Wild (1923), continued to demonstrate the dramatic skills and the innovation and of African-American actors in the musical/comedy genre, their versatility and experimentation in the "legitimate" or serious dramas was also being recognised.[69]

The role of the white playwright is not dismissed by Johnson[70]. He recognised for example that although Ridgely Torrence and Eugene O'Neill were not the first to use

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67 Alain Locke sees the perniciousness of this racist stereotype for what it is. He argues that the view of the Negro as a natural born actor "was intended as a disparaging estimate of the Negro's limitations, a recognition of his restriction to the interpretative as distinguished from the creative aspect of drama, a confinement, in terms of a second order of talent to the status of the mimic and the clown" (79); "The Negro and The American Stage" See Jeffrey C Stewart, (ed.) The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays On Art and Culture (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983) xvii. (A number of Locke's invaluable essays on the Harlem renaissance, the New Negro, and other contemporary issues and art forms are collected in this volume. Hereafter, all references to Locke's essays will be based on this volume, unless otherwise specified, and page references will follow the citation). This prejudice can also be linked to the status of comedy in relation to tragedy as explicated by Aristotle in the Poetics see T S Dorsch (trans.) Classical Literary Criticism - Aristotle· On the Art of Poetry; Horace · On the Art of Poetry; Longinus: On the Sublime (London: Penguin, 1965) Here Aristotle insists that "comedy represents the worst types of men; worse .. in the sense that it embraces any and every kind of badness" (37).

68 I do not want to suggest here that the comedies of the times or the musicals were low art. Black scholars have been and are aware of minstrelsy (black face mask) and the musical comedy as native African-American forms. However, it was this that led to the repeated stereotypical and racist representations of the Negro in theatre. Therefore a departure from the negatively reconstructed stereotypes can only be viewed as positive, insofar as it addresses the versatility of the negro actor See· Louis Gates Jr., "The Signifying Monkey", in Black Literature and Black Literary Theory and Houston Baker Jr., Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance 15-24. Both scholars discuss African-American minstrelsy and/or black face mask as part of the cultural tradition of African-American theatre.

69 The success of Shuffle Along, a pioneering black musical comedy is discussed more fully in Chapter Two.

70 Neither by Alain Locke. In "The Drama of Negro Life", he notes that pioneer efforts in Negro theatre "have not always been . [by] .. Negro playwright[s].The more noteworthy recent exponents of Negro drama, [are] Sheldon, Torrence, O'Neill, Howard Culbertson, Paul Green" (88)

the Negro as thematic material for their dramas, they were "the first to use the Negro and Negro life as pure dramatic material" (185), with the Negro as the exponent of the drama. Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones is a classic case in point.

Discussing the lack of African-American playwrights during the Harlem renaissance, Cruse argues that the movement as a whole was a "misnomer, a fad, a socially assertive movement in art that disappear[ed] and [left] no imprint" (37). In response to this, it could be argued that it rather depends on what one determines as an "imprint". If by imprint, Cruse requires the erection of Negro leaders' statues in, for example, Central Park in New York, then he is justified in regarding the movement as a misnomer that left no trace. If however, by imprint, one refers to a literary and cultural heritage, it is possible to perceive a number of positive and enduring imprints that came about during the Harlem movement, although perhaps not all of them would in the first instance be referred to as culturally significant in the way that Cruse seems to require.

In an interview with Alain Locke, Max Reinhardt,[71] after seeing Shuffle Along, described the Negro musical comedies as "very intriguing, not as things in themselves artistic, but in their possibilities, their tremendous artistic possibilities ... they are most modern ... most expressionistic" (Stewart 77). Whereas Locke had been keen to discuss the way ahead for "serious" Negro dramas, Reinhardt maintained that

> the drama must turn at every fresh period of creative development to an aspect which has been previously subordinated or neglected, and in this day of ours we come back to the most primitive and the most basic aspect of drama for a new starting point, a fresh development and revival of the art, - and that aspect is pantomime, - the use of the body to portray emotion. And your people have that art - it is their special genius (77).[72]

This statement relates directly to the aims of the Harlem movement as explicated by such leading figures as W.E.B.Du Bois and Alain Locke. For although the two differed in terms of what was to be the priority of the Harlem artist - the politics of aesthetics or the politics of race - they were unanimous in their belief that Negro dramatic art

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71 Max Reinhardt was an Austrian director. For more on Reinhardt, see Edward Braun, The Director and The Stage: From Naturalism to Growtowski (London: Methuen, 1982) 95-109; James Roose-Evans, Experimental Theatre From Stanislavsky to Peter Brook (London: Routledge, 1990) 62-72; Max Reinhardt "*Regiebuch for* The Miracle, Scene 1" in Directors on Directing (ed.) Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (London: Peter Owen, 1953) 296-311.

72 Reinhardt was not the only one to revere the return to popular traditional theatre forms and the plastic arts. Vsevolod Meyerhold, former student of Stanislavsky and the "most controversial director in Russian theatre" (Braun 109) at the turn of the century, also advocated plasticity and a return to the pantomimic in performance. See Edward Braun, The Director and The Stage for an assessment of his celebrated production of Nikolai Gogol's The Government Inspector and other productions 130-144; also 109-129; see also CLR James, "Popular Arts and Modern Society", in American Civilization (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1993). James maintains that "[Charlie] Chaplin has been called the one universal man of modern times, appealing to all, intellectuals and populace alike. He is new because of the primitiveness, the elemental quality of his medium - pantomime. He strikes deeper than mere wit or dramatic situation. Yet from this primitive element he has created some of the most subtle and complicated constructions of our time."118-165. (133)

> should lead back over the trail of the group tradition to an interest in things African ... the surest sign of a folk renascence seems to be a dramatic flowering. Somehow the release of such self-expression always accompanies or heralds cultural and social maturity. (Stewart 85).

Thus there was a recognition of the need to re-discover and articulate an African-American cultural and social identity that situated itself within an African tradition. To this end, spirituals and the blues[73] were viewed as vital to the African-American tradition and Johnson acknowledges that the Negro in Harlem made considerable advances in this area as well (226). Other enduring imprints included mainstream recognition of the achievements of Negro theatre. In November 1920, for example, Charles Gilpin was voted one of the ten people to have made a significant contribution to American theatre over the course of the year, and was subsequently invited, along with other nominees, to be dined by the Drama League. The invitation led to what Johnson describes as a "national crisis", adding that "this incident occurred only ten years ago, but already it has an archaic character. It is doubtful if a similar incident today could provoke such a degree of asininity" (184).[74] Ten years later, Gilpin was awarded the Spingarn medal by the NAACP, "for the highest or noblest achievement by an American Negro during the preceding year or years" (Johnson 185).

The Negro theatre establishment also gave rise to a number of actors and actresses who during the renaissance gained credence for their virtuosity in performance. Johnson cites Florence Mills as the child prodigy who went on to become the most popular female actress of her day, performing in London and Paris: "her popularity was unbounded. Her photographs were displayed everywhere, and her portrait was painted" (Johnson 199). African-American performers, however, gained more popularity than playwrights. It was white playwrights who were celebrated for bringing the Negro and Negro life to the stage. Two white playwrights, Paul Green and Marc Connelly received the Pulitzer prize in 1927 and 1929 respectively. Doubtless, Cruse would see this as yet another example of the failure on the part of the Harlem intelligentsia to forego the work of white playwrights and concentrate on improving the writing of the Negro playwright. Cruse however remains too unquestioning of his own ideas of cultural categorisation.[75] Similar ideas were addressed by Alain Locke (1942) in "Who and What is "Negro"?" For Cruse insists that

> If [the cultural renaissance] is for the enhancement of the Negro's cultural autonomy, his artistic and creative development or his

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73 Johnson points out in Black Manhattan that the blues are as essentially folk songs as the spirituals 228.

74 See Black Manhattan, in which Johnson details the protests that erupted because Gilpin, an African-American was invited to dine with other nominees. He describes how the Drama League were pressured by the press and the theatre establishment to withdraw the invitation 183-4.

75 In Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance, Houston Baker argues that only the success of Western "confinement" has brought about such categories as "art", "literature" "modernism" "civilisation". xvi-xvii

> nationality, or his group consciousness, or his identity in white America, then he must develop Negro creative writers of every type *but - especially for the theater* (37).

Locke however questions the very premise of Cruse's statement and asks "what is Negro ... what makes a work of art Negro, if indeed any such nomenclature is proper-its authorship, its theme or its idiom?" (Stewart 310)

Quoting the editors of a literary anthology *The Negro Caravan,* Locke argues

> The editors do not believe that the expression "Negro literature" is an accurate one ... A "Negro novel", or "a Negro play" are ambiguous terms. If they mean a novel or play by Negroes then such works as *Porgy* and The Green Pastures are left out. If they mean works about Negro life, they include more works by white authors than by Negro, and those works have been most influential upon the American mind ... The chief cause for objection to the term is that Negro literature is too easily placed by certain critics, white and Negro, in an alcove apart. The next step is a double standard of judgement, which is dangerous for the future of Negro writers. (Stewart 331)

It is precisely the issue of naming and categorisation that has resulted in the confusion over exactly what the Harlem renaissance entailed and what it stood for. Effectively, and in keeping with Hayden White's notion of the historical narrative as a cultural construct, each explication of the movement has resulted in a different history of the movement[76] based on the way in which the writer privileges certain events over and above the others. In other words, each writer begins from a certain set of assumptions which may or may not have a significant bearing on how the final narrative is constructed. Cruse, for example, writing in the mid-sixties, unwittingly perhaps reconstructs the Harlem movement in the light of events that were taking place at the time of writing. Thus, in order to come to an understanding of the African-American in the sixties, he plots a narrative of the twenties that is wholly contingent on the failure of the Harlem renaissance. For this reason he believes that the

> contemporary artists [of the 1960s] might lay claim to more of what might be called modern sophistication [but] ... their intellectual premise on the cultural arts is built on shifting sands that have been slipping from under them ever since the Harlem Renaissance and its radical allies missed the implication of cultural revolution in the 1920's (68-9).

His holistic appraisal of the 1920s and the Harlem movement does not take into account differences of view within the movement and one could argue that his belief in the need for "a" Negro playwright of repute, "a" leader in the style of Mabel Dodge, "a" cultural philosophy that outlined the aims and objective of the Harlem movement, is no more than a desire to replicate a hierarchical and paternalistic framework in which to

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76 I include my own assessment of the movement here.

house the African-American subject. In this way, Cruse proves to be an historian of his time insofar as he shows a marked similarity to the subject or subjects who accede to ideological imposed structures, which, as has already been demonstrated in the first part of the chapter, results in an unwitting collaboration with repressive ideologies; this despite his obvious contempt for integration.

Cruse's homologisation of the Harlem renaissance does not allow an investigation into fundamental and crucial differences within the movement. Differences which resulted in *intra*-movement differences, and gave to the renaissance cultural diversity. For example, in his assessment of the Harlem renaissance intelligentsia, he fails to acknowledge those writers and/or thinkers who *were* less interested in the problems of race *per se* and more concerned to appeal to the mass of African-Americans. Robert Hemenway examines the position of Hurston and others who viewed their status as New Negroes responsible for racial uplift with discomfort. Hemenway states: "They were unhappy with the idea that the esthetic geography of the Renaissance was to be bounded on the Du Bois side by propaganda and the Locke side by 'pure art'. Zora was one of these"[77]

Thus some members of the renaissance movement were more keen to investigate African-American folklore, without having to "treat the 'race question'"(39). Hemenway explains that the bourgeois faction of the renaissance were concerned to uplift the race without recourse to the African-American folklorist tradition, because they felt that displaying this tradition would only serve to reinforce negative racial stereotypes.[78] Hurston and others, who "enjoyed shocking the stuffy by calling themselves the 'Niggerati'" (43), felt that it was more important to create a pure folklorist art that would appeal to the black, particularly rural masses.[79]

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77 See Robert Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977) (38). Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

78 Brown-Guillory makes a similar observation in Their Place on Stage. She describes those African-American women playwrights who produced "genteel literature". This literature she argues de-emphasised race and therefore dialect and other features of African-American culture, because they wanted to emphasise the similarities - common humanity - not differences between the races" (11-12).

79 Hemenway deals quite extensively with the antics and literary aims of the "Niggerati", which included Wallace Thurman, author of the satirical novel based on the Harlem movement: Infants of the Spring (New York: Macaulay, 1932) and the drama Harlem (1929) written in collaboration with white playwright William Jourdan. Those who defined themselves as the "Niggerati" were also a part of the wider Harlem movement, however, they chose to represent themselves within the movement as being in opposition to the "founding fathers" of the New Negro concept, Alain Locke and W E B Du Bois. Their counter-journal Fire!! was, according to Hemenway, a deliberate attempt to provoke the elders of the movement. He also notes that (Langston) Hughes' belief that Du Bois gave the first issue of the journal "a roasting", is unfounded, and reflected the desire of the "Niggerati" to be the unconventional element in the movement. Hemenway argues that Du Bois "was *supposed* to dislike it because the *Fire!!* editors, the Young Turks of the Harlem Renaissance, did not want him to praise *Fire!!* as he had *The New Negro*. Only Du Bois' disapproval would authenticate their "pure" esthetic purposes ... in fact they had gone out of their

Hemenway observes that in-depth studies of the literary arm of the renaissance have always tended to focus on the New Negro artist and the book of the same title, at the expense of alternative representations of the movement such as Fire!!. This is an acknowledgement of other aspects of the movement, perhaps crucial for the avoidance of lop-sided historical narratives which are constructed on the basis of a process that involves homogenising the events in order to arrive at a satisfactory set of arguments that deal with - in the case of the Harlem renaissance - the failure of the movement.

A brief comparison of the historical narratives of the 1920s and the 1960s results in a recurrent theme, that is, the noticeable absence of African-American female cultural and political activism in the 1960s, relative to the acknowledged contributions of African-American women in the 1920s. African-American women very rarely appear in the secondary source material written by African-American male scholars of the 1960s, except as cursory references. This despite the fact that the 1960s was obviously a time of great social upheaval in the United States. This absence is one that has been observed by bell hooks in Ain't I A Woman.[80] It might be inferred from this that in order for the civil rights organisations and leaders to achieve their desired ends, and it should be stressed that all the leaders were men, they had no choice but to align themselves with white patriarchal structures in order to achieve political concessions in terms of desegregating American society. However as a result of political, and by implication ideological compromise, they excluded African-American women from black political activism on the main stage.[81] Thus where there is in evidence ideological structures in the manner of Althusser's ISA, it would seem that there is a stronger likelihood of collaboration on one level at the cost of other significant factors.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, when black people in American and the African and/or Asian continents had still to attain the same degree of nationalist and political autonomy as blacks in the 1960s there appears to be greater recognition of the contributions of African-American women (particularly within the Harlem renaissance). For example, in Black Manhattan James Weldon Johnson discusses the contributions of African-American actresses to the same degree that he considers African-American actors for example. Rather than making cursory references

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way to challenge the Victorian morality of the older New Negro spokesmen" (48). Had Cruse captured this element of the movement, he may well have been less simplistic in his analysis of the movement as a whole.

80 hooks discusses black men's reactions to black women on the political front in Ain't I A Woman 87-119

81 Angela Davis of course was at the forefront of black political activism in the 1960s and a positive role model for black women at the time. But for hooks (1982) "[a]lthough Angela Davis became a female heroine of the 60s movement, she was admired not for her political commitment to the Communist party, not for any of her brilliant analyses of capitalism and racial imperialism, but for her beauty, for her devotion to black men" (183); see also Michele Wallace, Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman (1978; London. Verso, 1990) 160-167.

to the women, he situates them as firmly as he situates the men of the period,[82] so that one develops the sense of a renaissance that was as contingent upon the African-American female creative artist as it was on the male. This is not to suggest that the Harlem renaissance was a utopia; but it does seem as if African-American women were as fully represented as African-American men, due to the efforts of elder scholars such as Locke and Du Bois who sought to encourage African-American women playwrights by establishing forums in which their plays could be read and/or performed. [83] One could speculate as to the reasons for this. It could be due to the fact that as an educated class, the intelligentsia, both the men and women of the movement felt that it was their duty to work towards race uplift so that African-American female role models became as important as African-American male role models. Writing around the time of the Harlem renaissance,[84] Du Bois' essay "The Damnation of Women" considers the history of black womanhood, acknowledging the fact that "[t]he crushing weight of slavery fell on black women" (Lester 515). Furthermore, Du Bois indicates his allegiance to, and profound respect for, black womanhood. Charting the history of black womanhood, he speaks against the denigration of black womanhood and white domination and situates black women as equals in the fight against white supremacy. In a damning indictment of white hegemonic rule in general and slavery in particular, he declares:

> I shall forgive the white South much in its final judgement day: I shall forgive its slavery, for slavery is a world-old habit; I shall forgive its fighting for a well-lost cause, and for remembering that struggle with tender tears; I shall forgive its so-called `pride of race', the passion of its hot blood, and even its dear, old laughable strutting and posing; but one thing I shall never forgive, neither in this world nor the world to come: its wanton and continued and persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust. I cannot forget that it is such Southern gentlemen in whose hands smug Northern hypocrites of today are seeking to place our women's eternal destiny - men who insist upon withholding from my mother and wife and daughter those signs and appellations of courtesy and respect which elsewhere he withholds only form bawds and courtesans (517)

For Du Bois, women were crucial and central to the struggle against racism and sexism, and as one of the elders of the renaissance, and one of the most prominent figures in the civil rights movement from the beginning of the century, his views no doubt influenced others. His belief that "in the great rank and file of our five million women we have the up-working of new revolutionary ideals", can be seen in his desire (along with Locke's) to foreground the writing of black women playwrights. If Cruse felt that there needed to be a prominent African-American playwright in the

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82 See for example his comments on Florence Mills, Ethel Waters, Rose McClendon, J Rosamond Johnson, "The three Smiths, Mamie, Bessie and Clara - not sisters" (227).

83 The contributions of W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke to new plays by African-American women and men are examined more fully in the folllowing chapter.

84 The exact date is not specified in The Seventh Son I. However, the index indicates that it was written between 1910 and 1934, which would mean that it was published around the events of the Harlem renaissance.

renaissance, then perhaps it could be argued that Du Bois felt that it ought to be the African-American woman, especially if she carried the "new revolutionary ideals".

It could also be argued that there were economic factors that influenced the degree to which women gained prominence in the 1920s. In 1920s Harlem there were a number of financially independent women who were also seen as leading figures in the movement such as A'Lelia Walker, referred to earlier in this chapter, her millionairess mother Madame C J Walker and Georgia Douglas Johnson (whose work I discuss in detail in chapter two). These women, it could be argued, strengthened the position of middle class women by projecting images of independence and self-determination. James Hatch and Ted Shine in their anthology Black Theater U.S.A. (1974) describe Douglas' race pride in later years which resulted in Johnson challenging young African-Americans to "'walk with your shoulders back! You're black men - you should be proud!'" (211). African-American women then, were also charting their own routes through cultural production and political activism.

Interestingly, when Cruse writes about the Harlem renaissance in the 1960s, he does not consider the work or contributions made by any women, except for Mabel Dodge and, in his opinion, her inadequate counterpart, A'Lelia Walker. Similarly, Kenneth Clarke in his essay on the civil rights movements of the 1950s-60s mentions one woman, Rosa Parks, in a cursory fashion, as the woman who inadvertently gave Dr. Martin Luther King the idea for his campaigns of peaceful protest (Clarke 121). Lomax also appears to be indifferent to the contributions of African-American women.[85]

One of the reasons for this could relate to Althusser's idea of the subject within ideology. Perhaps one of the fundamental differences between the African-American in the 1920s and the African-American in the 1960s, is that the latter subject was much more fully constituted as a subject within mainstream ideology; that is to say despite the continued racism and segregation, the African-American had, through civil rights and political activism, developed strategies of negotiating with the structures of domination in ways that proved *relatively* effective. In the twenties, when the lynching of African-Americans was on the increase, and segregation still very much in place, the African-American subject was still constituted as an ideological subject, but the scarcity of racially oriented organisations compared to the 1960s,[86] meant that as a social group they were not able to negotiate with the ideological structures in quite the same way.

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85 Perhaps this is why there was an increase of writing by African-American women from the 1970s. An effort to re-assert their own political and cultural voices and demands, having been rendered invisible by male scholars in the sixties, save for such damning reports as the 1965 Moynihan report which characterised the black family as pathological and blamed the black female for being too readily available to work and assume a male position within the family structure. See Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City.(Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1970).

86 By the mid-twenties, CORE and NAACP had of course already been established.

The result was that in the 1920s, African-American subjects were forced to re-establish their own socio-political and cultural identity, without constant recourse to the dominant structures of repression.

More importantly perhaps, it needs to be remembered that gender politics of the 1960s differed radically from those of the 1920s. While African-American women of the Harlem renaissance were able to demonstrate financial and social independence, black women in the sixties were caught between a race and gender battle. As Michele Wallace maintains in the revised introduction to Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, during the time of the black social upheaval, "the difficulty was that you weren't supposed to talk about both racial oppression and women's oppression at the same time" (xvii). Arguably the call for Black Power in the 1960s by Stokely Carmichael[87] was a call for Black *male* power. One can only wonder at the timely coincidence of Carmichael's resounding rallying cry for Black (masculine) Power in 1965, and the release of the Moynihan report also in 1965. In other words, women were not being encouraged to be politically and/or culturally active in the way that African-American women of the 1920s renaissance were. Furthermore, the self-determining roles of women such as A'Lelia Walker, Johnson and other women had been made redundant or rendered negative by the Moynihan report which explicitly attempted to shame black single and/or unmarried, mothers and female headed households.[88]

Arguably, it is not a deliberate attempt on the part of Cruse, Lomax and Clarke to ignore the contributions of women. One could argue that they were simply responding positively to patriarchal ideology, one that metaphorically speaking, had put women on the back burner.

In the following chapter the discussion and analyses will focus on plays by African-American women playwrights in the first two decades of this century. It will involve a three way process that begins by briefly discussing scholarly representations of twentieth-century African-American theatre by black and white scholars. It also seems necessary to offer a broader African-American theatrical context for the 1920s in general. Such a contextualisation will also serve to frame the work of the African-American women playwrights of the 1920s and situate them more overtly in relation to the Harlem movement and its cultural philosophies. The analyses of their plays which

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87 CLR James discusses the importance of Carmicheal, aligning him indirectly with Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro in The CLR James Reader (370) 362-374; see also Civil Rights and the Presidency 99-100

88 See Michele Wallace Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman "During the sixties it was not unusual for a successful black woman in a profession to feel extremely guilty, even to the point of sabotaging her own career or pursuing a male to replace her. Some simply quit their jobs and had babies. Black males thought nothing of saying, in reference to a black woman's job, `A brother should have that' 116.... And wasn't Moynihan saying the same thing? That the black woman had the temerity, the unmitigated gall to survive slavery - not to mention the hundreds of years of oppression that followed - is something that seems to upset a great many people" (118).

follows will seek to examine the ways in which the women playwrights of the 1920s used dramatic writing to re-present and contest the dominant white and patriarchal ideology of the time, in order to foreground alternative representations of African-American women.

CHAPTER TWO

ESTABLISHING A DRAMATIC TRADITION: BLACK WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Introduction

It seems that up until the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s African-American playwrights were not on the whole considered in any serious critical light. This is evident from critical studies, or anthologies of "American Drama", in which black playwrights are either excluded from the volume altogether or else subsumed under the (in)conveniently phrased "Black Theatre".

The three volumes of Twentieth-Century American Drama, 1900-, C.W.E. Bigsby (1982-1985) devotes volume II to dramatists who have come to be known as the founding (white) fathers of American Drama, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee; and, in volume III part V (the final part of the entire work), he is able to deal with the entire movement of "Black Theatre", "Gay Theatre", "Women's Theatre", along with "El Teatro Camsino", "American Indian Theatre", "Bread and Puppet Theatre" and "The San Francisco Mime Troupe".[1]

The problem is not only the fact that there is scant reference to black playwrights and/or so-called black theatre, but also the fact that such volumes write about "American Drama" of the twentieth century while failing to realise that they inadvertently focus on the predominantly white, male playwright. One would be forgiven for thinking that American drama this century has been written exclusively by white men and one or two white women. As Smith (1983) argues in his essay "Black Theatre", collected in a volume entitled Ethnic Theatre in the United States, "Blacks have been a part of the American stage since the 1700s, but very little of any of this

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1 C W E Bigsby, Twentieth-Century American Drama: 3 vol 1900-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982-5); I.237-256 on "Black Drama". There are other works which reiterate a similar oversight. See by way of example Alan S Downer, Fifty Years of American Drama (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co, 1951); Eleanor Flexner, American Playwrights 1918-1938 (New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1938); Thomas, H Dickinson, Playwrights of The New American Theater (New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1967); Ruby Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971); Bernard Dukore American Dramatists 1918-1945: Excluding O'Neill (London Macmillan, 1984) This last example acknowledges quite humorously the inclusion of Eugene O'Neill in almost every critical study of "American Drama" and is obviously attempting to draw attention to the fact indeed there are other playwrights worthy of critical appraisal, some of them women, as his inclusion of Lillian Hellman indicates.

long tradition has been recorded in the standard histories of American drama - a notable omission."[2]

In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for her play A Raisin in the Sun (1959). Prior to Hansberry's award, however, other African-American female playwrights had been writing dramatic texts and, in some instances, the plays were being produced for a general public.[3] These women playwrights who pre-date Hansberry by thirty to forty years are not to be found in the *authoritative* versions of twentieth-century American Drama, even though they were writing about the prevailing social, historical and economic conditions of African-Americans. In fact, as Hatch and Shine (1974) demonstrate in their anthology of plays by African-Americans, black dramatists were writing (and producing and performing) for the theatre as far back as 1847[4]

Ira Aldridge's contributions, for example as an American playwright and actor are *missing* from all three volumes of Representative Plays by American Dramatists (1918).[5] These oversights are characteristic of scholarship that views American cultural production as predominantly white, and in response to this racially motivated cultural myopia African-American scholars have sought to reinstate and acknowledge the plays of African-American dramatists by anthologising the works of black American playwrights. Writing in 1974, Hatch and Shine note in their foreword that "a number of black plays have recently been published and that their own anthology "represent[s] a historical approach to black drama that ... will give the reader some idea of what black playwrights think and feel about themselves, their people, and their country. These plays ... represent stages in the evolution of black dramaturgy in American" (ix).

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2 Edward G Smith, "Black Theatre", in Ethnic Theatre in the United States (ed.) Maxine Schwartz Seller (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983) (37).

3 For example playwrights of the Harlem renaissance who I shall be discussing more fully in this chapter.

4 James V Hatch and Ted Shine, (eds) Black Theater USA: Forty Five Plays by Black Americans 1847-1974. (New York: The Free Press, 1974). The editors include the work of Ira Aldridge, 1807-1867, probably the most famous African-American actor of his day, best known as a tragedian. Rejecting the standard African-American black-face role, Ira Aldridge travelled to Europe including Ireland (Dublin), where he played Othello to Edmund Kean's Iago, in England. He also played Titus Andronicus, King Lear, Macbeth, Shylock and Richard III. Hatch and Shine note that Aldridge's colour "irritated the English critics who could not endure to see a "slave" perform Shakespeare" (3). Despite this he was well received in Europe and "was the first black American honored by the Republic of Haiti for service to his race" (3). Aldridge was also a member of the first professional black theatre company in the United States · The African Grove. Hatch and Shine also point to other actors and actress who like Aldridge travelled to Europe in order to escape the confines of black-face theatre, including Elizabeth Taylor Greenfields, Victor Sejour, James Bland, Billy Kersands (1); see also Black Manhattan 74-93 in which Johnson details extensively Aldridge's career in American and Europe

5 Montrose J Moses, Representative Plays by American Dramatists Vol I: 1765-1819; Vol II 1815-1859; Vol III 1856-1917 (New York: E P Dutton & Co, 1918)

The importance of "black dramaturgy" in the United States has resulted in corresponding scholarship and works that cite only African-American playwrights. These works in addition to speaking to the failure of white scholarship to acknowledge African-American cultural contributions, also establish a tradition of primary and secondary dramatic source material that is vital for any student of Black Theatre history, African-American theatre history and its relationship to theatre practice and theatre history in general. Thus James Hatch and Abdullah OMANii [*sic*][6] have compiled an annotated bibliography of plays by African-American playwrights between 1827 and 1977, in which they also include, in the bibliography, a reference section which give details of completed and near completed MA and PhD theses on American theatre. The editors explain that

> The bibliography contains scholarly works in two categories. One category includes dissertations and theses by black scholars about black and white drama, theatre and theatre artist. The other includes dissertations and theses by white scholars about black drama, black theatre and black theatre artists (259).

Such volumes with detailed references to on going, new and established scholarship are vital to African-American history. It is an attempt not only to bring to light the *fact* of African-American cultural and dramatic production, but also to signify a *tradition* of black dramatic production.

Sadly, even this alternative seems to demonstrate significant lacunae with regard to black women playwrights. With the exception of Hatch and Shine (1974), who seek to anthologise less popular plays, few anthologies of the African-American playwrights acknowledge the contributions made to dramatic writing by African-American women. In Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre (1969), Doris Abramson lists seventeen African-American playwrights, two of whom are female, Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Childress. Hansberry is always a popular choice in such anthologies[7] and, as Hatch and Shine note, "there has been, until recently, a tendency to use the same playwrights and the same plays over and over again" (ix). Abramson, despite writing about the twenties, ignores the contribution of Georgia Douglas Johnson, for example, or Angelina Grimke, both of who were writing for theatre and were very well known within the Harlem renaissance movement.

While critical attention is now being given to African-American playwrights of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the awareness and acknowledgement of these women's contributions is slow. Yet, as I will attempt to demonstrate further on in

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6 James V Hatch and OMANii,[*sic*] Abdullah, Black Playwrights 1827-1977: An Annotated Bibliography of Plays (New York: R R Bowker, 1977).

7 See Horst Frenz (ed.), American Playwrights on Drama (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965). In this anthology of essays by American playwrights, Hansberry is the only woman and the only black.

this chapter, there were a surprising number of women playwrights during the twenties who also contributed to the "evolution of black dramaturgy", by challenging the perceived racist and sexist assumptions of whites, who "lacked a true knowledge of the black experience" (Hatch & Shine x).

Elizabeth Brown-Guillory in Their Place on Stage has described these African-American female playwrights as "mother playwrights" and "women mavericks". In an attempt to establish an African-American female dramatic tradition, she examines the black women playwrights who were writing during the Harlem renaissance and those that emerged between 1950 and 1980.[8] In so doing, Brown-Guillory seeks to develop a female dramatic lineage from the "mother playwright" in the twenties to her descendant daughter some forty to fifty years later, in order to situate black women playwrights historically.

The awareness of a specifically African-American literary heritage or tradition is not unique to playwrights. In Figures in Black, Henry Louis Gates constructs a similar lineage from African-American novelists and poets of the Harlem renaissance and contends that "[Sterling] Brown, [Jean] Toomer and [Zora Neale] Hurston comprise three cardinal points on a triangle of influence out of which emerged, among others, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker "(228).

Whether with playwrights, poets or novelists, both scholars effectively reconstruct the notion of African-American dramatic and/or literary "maverick" figures by acknowledging their influence on contemporary writers,[9] with the result that the renaissance writers gain a new credibility and recognition for contemporary black scholars.

While a significant number of volumes have been written about the African-American women and men, poets and novelists of the renaissance, detailed analyses of the dramatic texts by African-American women of the period are not given equal consideration. This could be due to the fact that the plays by the women of the Harlem

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8 Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, Their Place on Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988) (3). Specifically Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimke and Mary Burrill from the 1920s and Ntozake Shange, Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry from the 1950s-1980s. Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

9 Although Gates does not describe Brown, Toomer and Hurston as maverick, he does point to the fact that Brown employed black poetic diction at a time when "blacks stood in line to attack dialect poetry", because it was considered to be detrimental to representations of African-Americans (225). He also points out that James W Johnson argued fervently against dialect poetry, believing that it "stood in the shadow of the plantation tradition.... Dialect poetry, Johnson continued, possessed 'but two full stops, humor and pathos'" (226). See also Alice Walker, "The Divided Life of Jean Toomer", in In Search of Our Mothers' Garden, where she describes Toomer's virtual self-exile after his first novel Cane (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923); see R Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography 35-39, in which the biographer describes the unconventional, artistic and ebullient personality of Zora Neale Hurston.

renaissance and African-Americans in general did not achieve the same literary and/or cultural status as fiction and poetry that was being produced at about the same time. Another reason could be due to the fact that African-American playwrights as a whole were scarce relative to black and white, female and male poets and novelists who dominated the movement. Additionally the women playwrights of the renaissance were not necessarily professional playwrights. A number of the African-American playwrights whose work is anthologised in Black Female Playwrights were teachers as well as poets and/or playwrights. Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1966), for example, taught periodically. Perkins notes that "because of the unavailability of many of her works, it is difficult to determine which script was her first" (22). Shirley Graham (1896-1977), according to Perkins, only wrote three plays. She was however a prolific writer, producing twelve biographies and one novel over a period of thirty years. She was also field secretary to the NAACP and was an active civil rights campaigner along with her husband W.E.B. Du Bois.

There are other reasons however that point to why so few plays by African-American women playwrights of the 1920s are anthologised and critically evaluated. Firstly, Perkins notes that

> the large number of plays written by women could be attributed to the fact that since black women were not in any leadership position as compared to black men, these plays provided a unique opportunity for voices to be heard. Also, black women had never been allowed much of an opportunity to express themselves in the dramatic form and therefore seized the chance to do so (7).

In tandem with this, however, she also observes that playwriting was viewed as a male profession and, while African-Americans in general "did not achieve any significant status in the American theatre" (1) of the period, African-American women were doubly disadvantaged. For this reason, more than sixty published dramas by African-American women written before the 1950s "remained unheralded" (Perkins 1).

While Brown-Guillory acknowledges the view that "plays from the early twentieth century are rarely anthologised and infrequently the subject of critical attention, she fails to assert the fact that the "women mavericks" were writing within a radically different socio-historical and socio-cultural context, despite the themes of race and gender that recur in the plays of the contemporary African-American women playwrights. As a consequence of this oversight, Their Place on Stage ignores the historical conditions that were unique to African-American playwrights of the 1920s.

The historical and cultural specificity of the period is crucial for any analysis of the plays. Processes of cultural production are always contingent upon the socio-political and ideological climate of the time. That is to say, from an historical perspective it would be remiss to consider the plays of the 1920s as if they were written

in a period that was ahistorical or apolitical. Since the cultural and political climate directly inform the thematic and ideological construction of any literary or dramatic text, it becomes crucial to effect an historicist reading of the plays as opposed to one that might disregard the politico-historical context, in order to reproduce so-called universal thematic concerns.

I The Dramatic and Social Configurations of the Harlem Renaissance

This chapter will examine four plays that were written by two African-American women dramatists within the period that is generally seen to mark the Harlem Renaissance; 1919 to the Depression in the 1930s. The plays have been deliberately selected for their thematic concerns and the cultural status they held as dramatic texts within the Harlem Renaissance as a whole. It would be wrong to assume that these plays were typical of all the plays that were being written and or produced at the time (For the purposes of the chapter, they are interesting insofar as they are an attempt to explore and portray from a specifically black and female perspective what Brown-Guillory (1988) describes as the "blighted" lives of African-American women and men (3)). Despite the rarity of African-American playwrights in general during this period (as the chapter will demonstrate), there were other types of African-American dramatic production that ranged from being commercially and artistically successful to commercially unviable or artistically (politically) unacceptable.

According to Alain Locke, the "New Negro", that is the prominent cultural figures of the Harlem renaissance, held the responsibility of articulating for the as yet inarticulate African-American masses, the injustices of racism. Implicit in Locke's claim is the belief that thus far, African-Americans had been denied a public space within which to articulate black politico-cultural concerns. Also implicit in his belief stated here is the view that the mass of African-Americans formed an under-class, distinct from the elite New Negro whom he considered to be articulate. Locke gained prominence in 1925 when he edited The New Negro; an anthology of essays, poems, and short stories on contemporary African-American life by African-American writers. According to Jeffrey Stewart (1983), the aim of the both the New Negro as artiste and The New Negro anthology, was to create an African-American arts movement, that would offer a redefinition of blackness, racially, politically and aesthetically, through art and culture by utilising alternative political and artistic strategies.

In the introduction to the anthology of Black Female Playwrights Perkins observes:

> These plays, most of which were written when blacks were just learning the art of playwriting represent a historical perspective that reflects the lives of the early black women ... Many of the topics that these women focussed on were issues that could only be expressed by a black woman (2).

The plays that Perkins discusses in the introduction of the anthology, were all written and/or performed between 1919 and 1950.[10] Generally, the themes focussed on racial oppression as experienced by black women and their families. More specifically, however, the female protagonists in the plays are poor or lower class women, who are self-supporting with one or more children. As Perkins rightly states, the plays by these women are normally set in rural communities and the action takes place "in a domestic setting - the kitchen, dining room or living room"(2). More accurately, the kitchen, dining room and living room are the same. This feature of the plays is in keeping with Locke's assertion that the New Negro dramatist was part of a "unique social experiment" (Stewart 9) in America, one that involved articulating race issues and uplifting the race by recourse to folk and folk art. With this emphasis on the folk, Locke intended that those who he termed "the thinking negro[es]" (Stewart 7) should seek to articulate, and through artistic means, the lives of those whose humanity, according to Stewart "was seriously questioned" (xix).[11]

The "thinking negro" in drama had an especially problematic role given the complexities of theatre at the time. Broadly speaking, it is possible to discern two types of theatre production which were predominant at the time. Firstly, the musical comedies and secondly "legitimate" or "serious" dramas. One way perhaps of understanding the uniqueness of Douglas, Burrill and many if not all of the playwrights in Perkins'

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10 Perkins also acknowledges the fact that "there has not been an anthology totally devoted to the works" of those female playwrights of the Harlem renaissance, playwrights who she terms "pioneer writers" (1-2). The anthology contains nineteen plays by seven black female playwrights, including The Purple Flower (1928) and Exit: An Illusion (1929), by Marita Bonner; They That Sit in Darkness (1919) by Mary P Burrill; I Gotta Home (1939) and It's Morning (1939), by Shirley Graham; Color Struck (1925), by Zora Neale Hurston; Riding the Goat (1925), Harriet Tubman (1935) and Christophe's Daughters (1935), by May Miller.

11 Again one encounters curious and dated terms such as "thinking negro" "the race" and "the folk". These terms may well be viewed as problematic. Essentially, they are linked to a belief of the time that viewed rural and urban African-Americans as economically and intellectually disadvantaged. While the term "thinking-negro" presupposes a class distinction in which the educated-class/upper classes are perceived as the representatives of the race, it must be remembered that writers/thinkers such as Zora Neale Hurston and indeed Alain Locke felt that black "folk" culture (especially rural) ought to be foregrounded and celebrated as a vital part of African-American cultural production. Du Bois equivalent of the "thinking negro" is acknowledged by W B Gatewood who argues that Du Bois believed "[a] rising race must be aristocratic" (23). (I discuss the general perception of education by the Harlem intelligentsia in section II of this chapter). Elsewhere Stewart notes that Locke was a "quintessential intellectual" (xix) who was ever caught between two diametrically opposed positions. While his Ivy League and Oxbridge education helped to develop his love of high European art, it also created a tension with his desire to "create a popular usable art for all the people" (xix). It was Alain Locke who espoused aestheticism as the prerequisite for African-American art when W.E.B. Du Bois was insistent that art should be propaganda.

anthology is to examine the other forms of theatre production that were being practised along with the attendant economic and commercial factors that impinged on companies and theatres at the time.

James Weldon Johnson (1930) notes that during the seven years in which the Negro was exiled from theatre downtown in New York, "a real Negro theatre" developed in Harlem, "that is, a theatre in which Negro performers played to audiences made up almost wholly of people of their own race." (170)[12] According to Johnson, many theatres, particularly in Southern states, had, for over a decade been segregated, while selected theatres in cities such as Chicago were "patronized principally by colored people" (170).[13] Despite the popularity of musical comedies, the period of exile allowed for African-American actors or producers to experiment with what Woll describes as serious drama and classic revivals" (xii). It meant that African-American actors could now move away from the racist stereotypical roles that had been imposed on them since the time of the minstrel performances, to look instead towards performing roles that offered a greater latitude then previously. (Woll xii) Principally then it was the African-American actor, as opposed to the African-American playwright who was able to enjoy a more challenging and engaging role in the theatre. While serious and legitimate dramas were developed and performed by African-American travelling theatre companies (these are discussed further on in the chapter), musical comedies were gaining commercial and artistic success to the extent that "Broadway [that is white] audiences began to travel to Harlem to enjoy a form of theatre that was no longer available on the Great White Way." (Woll xvii)

The most outstanding success during the renaissance was Shuffle Along, a musical comedy by Eubie Blake, Flourney Miller, Aubrey Lyles and Noble Sissle.[14] Shuffle Along became "the surprise hit of the season". Its success catapulted the cast to immediate stardom, while lead actors Miller and Lyles who wrote the libretto "appeared on Broadway almost every season throughout the twenties". Actors such as Paul Robeson, Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, who were in the replacement cast and not the original line up "found Shuffle Along the first step to international stardom" (Woll

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12 Johnson records this period of exile as lasting from 1910 to 1917. This is clarified by Alan Woll in Dictionary of the Black Theatre : Broadway, Off-Broadway and Selected Harlem Theatre (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983) xiii. Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

13 Woll argues that "[o]ne of the ironies of black theatre history is that whites have traditionally composed a majority of the audience. Even as late as the 1920s when black musicals and dramas flourished on Broadway, many theatres remained segregated, limiting blacks to the balcony ... or separate sections of the orchestra." (xvi)

14 Eubie Blake, Flourney Miller Aubrey Lyles and Noble Sissle formed the Shuffle Along production company. As well as performing in the musical, Miller and Lyles were "on the book", Blake composed the score and Sissle wrote the lyrics. For individual biographies on the four producers/performers see Dictionary of the Black Theatre: Eubie Blake 188-189; Noble Sissle 188-189; For Miller and Lyles "[the] premier black comedians of the Jazz Age" (Woll 232), see 232-233

148). Shuffle Along premiered on May 23, 1921 "and all New York flocked to the Sixty-third Street [music hall] Theatre to hear the most joyous singing and see the most exhilarating dancing to be found on any stage in the city". (Johnson 186) Its success seems to be due to a number of factors. For both a black and a white audience, Shuffle Along, which ran for over five hundred performances in 1921 and was revived in 1933 and 1952, combined comedy, several hit songs and "breathless choreography"(Johnson 186). Thus the directors had successfully combined dance, music and vaudevillian forms in order to create a popular and "epoch- making musical comedy" (Johnson 186). Another reason for its outstanding success was due to the fact that the producers and the entire cast were African-American. A critic for the 1923 production maintained that "[t]he principal assets of 'Shuffle Along' which arrived at Sixty-third Street Music Hall ... was the distinction of being written, composed and played entirely by Negroes"[15]

Yet despite the success of Shuffle Along and the undisputed acclaim, both The New York Times critic and Johnson refer to the financial risks and setback which, with hindsight, points to the gamble that Blake *et al.* had to take in order to become an autonomous company seeking to direct their own artistic aims and objectives. While The New York Times critic felt that Shuffle Along had "here and there a broad comedy scene that [was] effective", it also acknowledged that Shuffle Along was "extremely crude in writing, playing and direction ... also ...the limited stage facilities at the renascent Sixty-third Street playhouse enhance the crudities of production until the general effect is about that of a fair-to-middling amateur entertainment"(The New York Times, vol.1). What the critic does not acknowledge in this luke-warm response is that as with so many black companies that were attempting to assert themselves as

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15 The New York Times Theater Reviews, Vol 1 1920-1926 (New York: The New York Times and Arno Press, 1971) (hereafter The New York Times). These reviews in ten volumes cover over fifty years of theatre reviewing for The New York Times, from 1920-1978 All the reviews have been bound in volumes, however, the volumes of reviews up until the 1970s *do not* have page numbers. Instead reviews are catalogued in date order. Future volume references will follow the citation. In the introduction to volume one, Brooks Atkinson explains that " [t]here were fifteen daily newspapers in New York, all of which commented on the theatre. Opinions on the plays were accordingly prolific and various.... In the half century covered by these volumes The Times had nine consecutive critics" (Atkinson, The New York Times, vol 1.). These included Alexander Woollacot, from 1920 to 1922; he was succeeded by John Corbin "a formidably educated man both at Harvard and Oxford". 1924 to 1925 Stark Young became The New York Times critic; from 1925 to 1960 Brooks Atkinson served as the drama critic with the exception of four seasons during World War Two, when Lewis Nicholls served as The New York Times critic. Between 1960 and 1965, Howard Taubman "who had been The [New York] Times music critic" (Atkinson, The New York Times, vol. 1) became the drama critic. For eight months during 1966, Stanley Kaufman was the critic; from 1966-1967 Walter Kerr took over while also writing for The Sunday Times. In 1967 "Clive Barnes ... came to The[New York] Times from London as dance critic and ... accepted the additional post of drama critic for the daily paper." Anderson explains that in 1967 The New York Times took the decision of dividing the role of drama critic between two people "[s]ince The Times management had become sensitive to a common complaint that The [New York] Times drama critic had too much power over the theatre industry." (Atkinson, The New York Times, vol. 1) Consequently, in 1967, the role was divided between Barnes who wrote for the daily paper and Kerr who wrote for the Sunday paper.

legitimate theatre practitioners, technical and financial resources were scarce. Despite the fact that "[i]n the twenties the New York Theatre dominated the show business of the nation" (The New York Times, vol. 1 introduction), production companies like Shuffle Along were still labouring under the welterweight of racial discrimination. Consequently, "[a]lthough their talents were many ... their means were limited and they had no easy time." (Johnson 187). Shuffle Along company first performed in Washington DC, in Howard Theatre, a segregated theatre for blacks. Johnson reports how, on first gathering at the train station, "they did not have quite enough money for transportation and there had to be a quick scurrying round to raise the necessary funds." (187) While they attained the goal of performing on Broadway, it was, as Johnson maintains "on a shoe-string" (187). Such economic set backs inevitably affect not only the process of theatre production but the product, as The New York Times theatre critic was quick to point out; and yet, despite these setbacks, "black shows returned to Broadway in great numbers after the surprising triumph of Shuffle Along" (Woll xiv).

As a musical comedy Shuffle Along also served to legitimise the black musical on Broadway. Its commercial success which resulted in a number of popular hit records on an international scale proved that both black and white audiences "would pay to see black talent on the Great White Way". Woll also observes that "[a]s a result of the success of Shuffle Along black musicals swiftly became a Broadway staple" (148).

Other musicals from around the same period such as Put and Take (1921) and Liza (1922) were seen as pale reflections of Shuffle Along. Johnson notes that Put and Take was by all standards "a good show". For The New York Times critic, it was doubtless that "the vogue of Shuffle Along ... ha[d] brought about the production of Put and Take" (vol.1). Put and Take was written and directed by Irving C. Miller, the brother of Flourney Miller. It opened three months after Shuffle Along and toured for a year to fifty cities from New Orleans to Chicago. Interestingly, the production, which deliberately sought to avoid all reference to minstrelsy in form and content, was treated with contempt by the critics of Variety. In 1921, the Variety critic felt that there was "too much effort to be dressed up and dignified.... Colored performers cannot view with white ones.... Here the colored folk seem to have set out to show the whites that they are just as white as anybody. They may be good but they are different, and in their entertainment they should remain different, distinct and indigenous."(Woll 131) The New York Times critic offers a more generous criticism and once again alerts the reader to the limited technical resources of the theatre itself and the effect this has on the production as a whole. He says:

> [t]here is no occasion to make excuses of this latest all-negro revue ... [it is] a lively and lilting entertainment, filled with excellent dancing, good singing and quite a dash of comedy.... Town Hall (that adaptable auditorium) is not the best place in the world for it - the stage facilities are limited and the negro dialect does not penetrate the corners of the

> auditorium any too well. If one is willing to overlook a few crudities of production, however, 'Put and Take' is excellent and novel revue. There is the flavour of minstrelsy through it although it contains no out-and-out minstrels.

Liza was also compared to Shuffle Along by The New York Times critic. Like its predecessor it premiered on Sixty-third Street Music Hall; on November 27 1922. Previous to its Broadway premiere, the revue opened at the Lafayette theatre in Harlem. According to the Dictionary of Black Theatre "its 169 performance run made it the most successful black musical of the 1922-1923 season. Part of the reason for its success may have been its willingness to copy the plot and format of Shuffle Along." (Woll 98).[16] The New York Times critic describes this "willingness to copy" as "thoroughly justifiable in view of the year or more which Shuffle Along endured in Sixty-third Street"(vol. 1)

The musical comedies then established a new tradition of "all negro" productions that despite being handicapped by "crudities of production" enjoyed successful runs on and off-Broadway and launched African-American production teams and casts as talented, competent and successful in their own right, despite the lack of technical and, often, financial resources.

There were those, however, whose philosophy of theatre practices rejected outright the seductive characteristics of popular musical comedies and revues. While the school of musical comedies sought to reach as wide an audience as possible on the Great White Way, others could only perceive the ridiculousness of such a hope, given the nature or the form and content of the genre as a whole. Both Alan Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois envisaged a different route for the African-American in theatre. In African-American Theatre (1994), Samuel A Hay[17] maintains that

> most early musicals were objects of disgust for such erudite African-Americans as Locke and Du Bois. [In musical comedies] [t]he significance of the theme simplification rule was that it actually fostered the creation of stereotypes (20)[18]

There were then, on a general level, competing racial/dramatic philosophies that sought to demonstrate and foreground images of African-Americans that were altogether more positive, images that stemmed from beliefs of self-determination and

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16 For full details of the cast and synopsis of the musical see Dictionary of the Black Theatre 98-99.

17 Samuel A Hay, African-American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Future page references to this text will follow the citation

18 "Theme simplification" refers to the way in which stock, or stereotypical characters were engaged in plots that were simplistic. As Hay argues it was a convention of musical comedies, a formula; "[e]ven African American minstrels and vaudevillians obeyed the rules of simplification and implication." (19) Du Bois' view was that such conventions only perpetuated false and negative images of African-Americans; he wanted themes to be problematised.

race pride. Yet despite the approbation of Locke and Du Bois, they too differed in terms of their political-aesthetic beliefs of African-American theatre:

> Locke demanded plots that were full of ... peoples' lusty lives, myths, legends, and histories. [He] wanted characters who were off the streets, who came out of joints and dives - people who while 'cuttin' the fool' expressed honesty and personal emotions, irrespective of politics (Hay 5).

Du Bois on the other hand "wished for characters who came from the same mold as model human beings and historical figures, characters who pined because of frustrated hope" (Hay 5). Despite their differences however, both philosophers were instrumental in establishing an educational and institutional base for African-American playwrights who were encouraged to write native drama; be it the native folk drama, as espoused by Locke, or native race/propaganda drama in the manner of Du Bois' beliefs. In order to offer a stimulus to potential young playwrights, Du Bois as editor of Crisis magazine collaborated with Charles S Johnson, the editor of Opportunity to launch a literary and dramatic contest. The winners of the contest would have their plays published in one or other of the journals and "the plays selected would receive cash awards .. a ceremony would be given for the winners, thereby providing exposure for the writers" (Hay 7) Interestingly, despite her view that black women playwrights suffered from racial and gender discrimination, Perkins also notes that women outnumbered men in submission of plays so that consequently most of the winners were women. Thus African-American women playwrights began to have a platform from which to both launch their plays which focussed on the black - and frequently female experience - while at the same time launching themselves as playwrights. However the plays by African-American women of the period would have been inadvertently lodged between two more commercially viable modes of theatrical expression: Firstly, the musical comedies already cited which were being admirably received by most critics and audiences, and, secondly, "legitimate negro plays" or serious dramas that were written by white playwrights and were also receiving critical acclaim for their apparently characteristic truth-to-life portrayal of African-American life.

If the African-American was seeking to offer representations of an active, self-determining artistically inspired self, the white dramatist writing on the negro theme wrote plays that "concerned such themes as poverty and miscegenation [while] black superstition and mythology remained of major interest" (Woll xiv). A brief discussion of the plays of Eugene O'Neill and Ridgely Torrence will substantiate this point.

In his essay "The Drama of Negro Life" (1925)[19] Montgomery Gregory charts the rise of serious negro drama. While Gregory perceives 1910 as "the first significant step" (156) towards legitimate African-American drama, Johnson dates April 5, 1917 as being "the most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in American theatre" (175). According to Gregory, Edward Sheldon's The Nigger (later called The Governor) which performed at the New Theatre, New York, marked "the first sincere attempt to sound the depths of our racial experience for modern drama" (157). For Johnson, however, the trilogy of one-act plays by Ridgely Torrence not only served to make the negro theme legitimate in theatre, it also gave African-American actors the chance to display an acting ability that moved beyond burlesque characterisation and formulaic and simplistic plot structures. The trilogy started with The Rider of Dreams, a play that Johnson describes as "a true comedy", of rustic negro life, followed by Granny Maumee, a tragedy "which contained a vivid scene of voodoo enchantment" and finally Simon the Cyrenian, a "Passion Interlude" about the story of Simon, the black man who was Jesus' cross-bearer (Johnson 176). The company of actors, The Colored Players were an experienced cast of twenty-two "talented Negro actors" (Johnson 176) directed by Robert Edmond Jones. According to Gregory, only the intervention of World War One disrupted what might have been the beginnings of "a permanent Negro Little Theatre in New York City" (157). "On April 6, 1917 a day after the premiere, the United States declared war on Germany. The increasing stress of the war was too great, even for stronger enterprises in the theatre, and it crushed them out" (Johnson 175). While Gregory and particularly Johnson insist that "the praise of the critics was enthusiastic and practically unanimous" (Johnson 175), probably the most influential critic of the day Alexander Woollacot dissented from the popular view. For Woollacott, the playwright Torrence had written three "interesting and sympathetic dramas" but he felt that:

> the decision to assemble a cast of negro players for the varied and exacting roles ... was a decision which led - perhaps inevitably - to disturbingly and needlessly inadequate performance. Mr. Torrence's plays are badly acted at the Garden - quite too badly acted. The sympathetic quality of his unusual and deeply interesting texts, the presumably gracious spirit and motive of the producer (Miss Emilie Hapgood) and the unerring eye of the director (Robert E Jones) cannot make amends for the fact that the pieces are incompetently played. There is every reason why the producers of Mr. Torrence's work should have assembled for themselves a company of negro actors if they could have found negro actors of sufficient skill and understanding to play them well. Probably they could not.... Now and then the presence of a genuine negro in the cast illumines one of Mr. Torrence's touches splendidly but these rewards are few ... For the most part, a Broadway cast of average competence could have served the plays far, far, better.... Of course the whole point of this lament is not that the producers of the plays at the

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19 Montgomery Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life" in The New Negro: An Interpretation (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925) 153-161. Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

> Garden chose negro actors, but that they chose unskillful one. It is too bad that a passion for literal and unimaginative realism should have been suffered to do damage to three such interesting and unusual plays. (The New York Times, vol.1)

According to Johnson almost half of the Colored players *had* received exceptional training and professional experience in theatre; either with the most successful musical comedy troupes or with travelling companies. Clearly for Woollacot it is the skill of the *white playwright* that predominates rather than the attempt by an *all black company* to translate the dramatic text for the stage. Like the Variety critic who felt that black actors could not and should not vie with white actors, Woollacot highlights the prejudices that existed for the black actor who attempted to move beyond minstrelsy and the musical tradition. The white playwrights rendering of the negro experience seems to have been viewed as more realistic and considered than any performance interpretation offered by the black actor.

Eugene O'Neill received an equally favourable review for his play The Emperor Jones which was performed by the Provincetown Players on November 1 1920 at the Neighbourhood theatre. Both reviewers and commentators are, in this instance, unanimous in their decision that The Emperor Jones was an unprecedented success at the level of the dramatic text and the acting. In his review dated November 20 1920 Woollacott notes that despite clumsy production,

> it weaves a most potent spell thanks partly to the force and cunning of its author, thanks partly to the admirable playing of Charles S Gilpin in a title role so predominant that the play is little more that a dramatic monologue. His is an uncommonly powerful and imaginative performance in several respects unsurpassed this season in New York. Mr. Gilpin is a negro. (The New York Times, vol. 1)

Gilpin's role as Brutus Jones, according to Woll, "was the surprise of the season" (59) while Johnson maintains that he became an overnight success: "[t]he next morning Gilpin was famous. The power of his acting was enthusiastically and universally acclaimed. Indeed, the sheer physical feat of sustaining the part - the whole play is scarcely more than a continuous monologue spoken by the principal character - demanded admiration" (184). As a result of his performance, Gilpin was voted by the Drama League to be one of the ten people who had done most for American theatre during that year and was subsequently invited to a Drama League celebrity dinner with the other nine major contributors to American theatre in 1920. According to Johnson, Gilpin's invitation resulted in "a controversy that divided the Drama League, the theatrical profession, the press, the public" (184). Because of the segregation laws and prevailing racist attitudes "[p]ressure was brought to have the invitation withdrawn ... [t]hen the pressure was centered upon Mr. Gilpin to induce him not to attend the dinner.

The amount of noise and heat made, and of serious effort expended, was worthier of a weightier matter than the question of a dinner with a colored man present as a guest." (184)

While the title role in the Emperor Jones established Charles Gilpin as one of the foremost American actors of the era, it also saw the playwright O'Neill become one of the established and respected playwrights of the Negro theme. His play All Gods Chillun Got Wings premiered on May 15, 1925 at the Provincetown Playhouse, and was performed by the Provincetown Players. Directed by James Light, the production involved a racially mixed cast. Once again, O'Neill's dramatic text served as a springboard for public and institutional moral outrage. On May 18 1924 The New York Times critic, John Corbin led the way with not so much a review of the production as a moral treatise on the evils of miscegenation. Thus:

> from the moment the Provincetown Players announced their production of Eugene O'Neill's play it was evident that we were in for a campaign of race hatred and bigotry differing in no essential from the propaganda of the Klansmen. A white woman married to a huge black man, kneeling on the floor before him and kissing his hand - the exhibition and contemplation of such a thing could only incite to miscegenation, work corruption to the very blood and essence of our Americanism!...Let me add with all possible emphasis that I do not believe in mixed marriages especially between races as different as the white and the black. Common observation tells us that in many respects, both mental and moral, the average negro is inferior to the average white, and the army mental tests have strongly confirmed it [!] ... the fact remains ... ethically and biologically, mixed marriages are undesirable - a crime against the future of our people. (The New York Times, vol. 1)

In this instance, the content of All Gods Chillun so incensed the critics in general that reviews tended to actually by-pass the play as a theatrical event *per se*. Instead moral and racist overtures served as commentary to the dramatic event as a whole. In general however, O'Neill and Torrence became respected by both blacks and whites for their handling of the Negro theme and experience, even though it was also acknowledged that the treatment of the negro theme by white dramatists would result in dramas that continued to portray blacks in a negative light. Johnson argues that "[c]olored people often complain about the sort of light that is shed upon the race in most Negro plays [by whites]. It may be - there is no certainty - that their remedy lies in the development of negro playwrights." (225)

There *was* a development of negro playwrights - as Perkins' anthology proves. There was also a development of negro travelling theatre companies. The most renowned travelling theatre company was the Anita Bush Stock Company established in 1916. The company later changed its name to the Lafayette Stock Company, under new

artistic directorship, before becoming the well know Lafayette Players.[20] By the end of 1917 there were a total of three Lafayette Player stock companies. One was based in Chicago as an extension of the New York Lafayette company and one which toured cities from Washington to Baltimore.

The Lafayette Players were an all-black company who aimed to "produce legitimate drama " (Thompson 17). Johnson notes that Harlem saw the rise of two theatres in Harlem between 1910 and 1917: "the Lafayette and the Lincoln. Within several years both of these houses had good stock-companies, and for quite a while their repertories consisted chiefly of downtown successes." (172) Acknowledging the contribution made by the Lafayette Players to African-American theatre production Johnson also notes that the Players "developed into a very proficient organization that gave adequate representations" of melodramatic plays that appealed to Harlem audiences. (172)[21] According to Thompson, both black and white audiences were educated by the Lafayette Players who "had a profound influence upon Black American theatre history" (24). She acknowledges that not since the previous century had a black theatre company genuinely attempted to present legitimate drama.[22] The existence of

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20 For a more detailed assessment of the work of Anita Bush and the history of the Lafayette Players see Sister Francesca Thompson, "The Lafayette Players 1917-1932", in The Theater of Black Americans (ed.) Errol Hill 13-37; Black Manhattan 172-175; Dictionary of the Black Theatre 236-262; African-American Theatre 144-148. There were other African-American travelling or Stock theatre companies such as the Colored Players who produced Ridgeley Torrence's trilogy as cited earlier, see also Black Manhattan 175-179; the Ethiopian Art Movement under the direction of Raymond F O'Neill. On May 7, 1923 the Ethiopian Art Players produced a trilogy of plays at the Frazee Theatre: Salome, Comedy of Errors and The Chip Woman's Fortune, a one-act play by African-American playwright Willis Richardson. On May 8 1923 The New York Times critic gave the following review under the title "Ethiopians Act Salome": "[a] good deal of shouting and a small amount of good playing were served at the Frazee last night ... so far as last nights performance is concerned [the company] makes a negative impression - it is not particularly good, and it is not particularly bad and it has its moments when it is art and other moments when it is theatre and still other moments when it is neither" (The New York Times, vol. 1). According to Johnson, "[s]ome of the critics said frankly that however well Negroes might play 'white' classics like Salome and Comedy of Errors, it was doubtful if they could be so interesting as they would be in Negro plays, if they could be interesting at all."(Black Manhattan 191) See also Woll, Dictionary of the Black Theatre 42-43. Neither the Ethiopian Art Players nor the Colored Players achieved the long-term success of the Lafayette Players who are seen as the forerunners to companies who operated in similar ways, managerially and artistically. Thompson cites the Negro Art Theatre of the 1940s, the Rose McClendon Players, the Alhambra Theatre, The Gilpin Players, and the WPA Federal Negro Theatre Project as companies who followed in the steps of the Lafayette Players; "[e]ach of these groups included members who had originally been with the Lafayette Players." 28

21 A number of well know African-American actors from the period worked with the Players and gained their experience from the repertoire style management of the company. Abbie Mitchell, Evelyn Ellis, Charles Gilpin, Inez Clough, Evelyn Preer all performed with the Harlem Lafayette Players at some stage in their acting careers. For a fuller biography of those cited see Woll 203, 209,235, 242

22 In 1820, the African Grove Theatre was formed in New York City. The group was established by James Hewlet, "the first of the Negro tragedians" (Mitchell, Black Drama 24) They were a travelling company but they also performed in their own venue, The African Theatre. Ira Aldridge (cited earlier) was also a member of the company. When the company disbanded, Aldridge departed for Europe; see n4 of this chapter; also Loften Mitchell, Black Drama: The

the Lafayette Players allowed for Black actors to tackle challenging and demanding roles. "Prior to the advent of the Players, there were no Black actors performing significant roles on Broadway. Charles Gilpin was the first ... to receive serious attention form Broadway critics and audiences" (Thompson 25). For these reason, and the fact that they sought to educate black and white audiences, Thompson argues that the importance of the Lafayette Players cannot be denied or ignored. The Players performed in Southern Cities which were deeply entrenched in institutional and social forms of racial segregation:

> [s]o unaccustomed were some of these novice audiences to serious dramatic entertainment that, on at least one occasion preceding a play ... the manager had to instruct the audience on what to expect and how to behave during the performance. Thus, the Players became educators as well as entertainers. They were instrumental in guiding their audiences to accept a more sophisticated and an intellectually superior form of entertainment. Especially advantageous to their audience was the fact that the Black performers, because of a great understanding, were more patient with the occasional disruptions caused by those who came to see them. Because of a lack of previous exposure to drama, Black theatregoers were not prepared to enjoy or to appreciate properly what was being presented to them for the first time....Many skeptical blacks were taught by the Lafayette players that legitimate drama was good entertainment. (27)

The Laffayette Players disbanded in 1932 owing to the Great Depression.

Although rarely acknowledged, Anita Bush was also instrumental in attempting to foreground the work of African-American playwrights. Arguably Bush was influenced by criticism levelled at the company "for neglecting plays dealing with Negro life" (Thompson 19). Thus "[o]n January 16, 1916, it was announced in the New York Age that Miss Bush was offering a prize for the best sixty-minute sketch dealing with Negro life" (Thompson 19). Although none of the plays submitted were produced by the Lafayette Players, Thompson believes that "[n]ew and startling black dramas would be written after the Players' demise, but one may speculate how soon the writing of these dramas would have been possible had it not been for the endeavors of ... the Lafayette Players." (26) One person who had a dual role with the Players was Frank Wilson, actor and playwright. Wilson wrote and performed for the Lafayette Players, producing a new one act play every six weeks. He would then direct and/or act in the play which was presented at either the Lincoln or the Lafayette theatre. Woll cites Colored Americans, Confidence and Race Pride as three of Wilson's legitimate dramas which focussed on race. In 1926 at the age of forty, Wilson was staring in the Broadway production of In Abraham's Bosom[23] when he won the Urban League contest for

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Story of the American Negro in the Theatre (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967). Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

23 In Abraham's Bosom was a play on the "negro theme" written by white playwright Paul Green. On May 1927 it won the Pulitzer Prize for best play of the year. For cast list, synopsis and reviews of the play see Woll, 84-85.

"unpublished black playwrights" (Woll 262) for his one-act play Sugar Cane. In 1935 he took up the position of resident playwright with the Federal Theatre Project's unit in Harlem.

> Both as actor and playwright, Wilson deserves an important place in black theatre history. Although not as prodigiously gifted an actor as Ira Aldridge or Paul Robeson, Wilson must be given a prominent niche in the annals of the American stage on the basis of his many Broadway and Off-Broadway portrayals in title roles of Black drama. And although he never attained any lofty status as a playwright, the undeniable fact is that he had two plays produced on Broadway and two other produced by the Federal Theatre Project's black unit. No other black has had such a distinguished dual acting-playwrighting career (Woll 263)

And yet as Thompson points out the fact is that the African-American playwright did not keep pace with the actor. "It would have benefitted both actors and writers if the progress made by the actors had been paralleled by a similar progress among Black playwrights (Thompson 26).

In The Negro in American Culture, Margaret J Butcher argues that "[e]xcept for the short-lived Federal Theatre Project the Negro Playwright has been without experience in the professional theatre. He has turned to the tributary theatre - community, college, and semi-professional groups - to learn and practice his craft"[24] It is the tributary theatre that Georgia Douglas Johnson, Mary Burrill *et al.* worked within. Arguably, as playwrights, black women such as Douglas Johnson, had little chance of achieving the mainstream recognition and status of the revues on Broadway, the plays on African-Americans by white men or the travelling players.

Their plays were not reviewed nationally and neither were they performed in public mainstream theatre venues. On the contrary these playwrights talents and desire to write for the theatre were fostered mainly through an educational base. In short as playwrights, they were nurtured in an environment that dealt more specifically with the political and intellectual thematic concerns than with the more commercial and theatrical concerns. Also a number of the women were famed poets or novelists who were novices of the dramatic form. For example, Douglas Johnson's literary career "jelled as a lyric versifier" (Hull 168), before she attempted to write plays. She appears to have gained more literary and critical acclaim than many of the other writers in Perkins' anthology perhaps because she came to prominence, firstly, as a poet. Gloria Hull, in Color, Sex and Poetry, notes that "her celebrity status accrued to her because of her achievements as an author". [25] Mary Burrill, however, who had "an outstanding reputation as a teacher and as a director for numerous dramatic productions throughout

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24 Margaret J Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1972) 202. Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

25 Gloria Hull, Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 168.

the Washington D.C. area ... spent most of her career at Dunbar High where she taught English, speech, and dramatics." (Perkins 55) Despite the desire of the playwrights to adopt the dramatic form, it must be stressed that few if any of these plays were ever performed and rarely published. Perkins is of the view that the black women playwrights did not really expect to see them staged and that playwright Marita Bonner "would write on her plays 'a play to be read', as opposed to being performed." (Perkins 16).[26] Johnson submitted five plays to the Federal Theatre Project between 1935 and 1939. Three of the plays were based on lynching, two on rape. None of these plays were accepted by the Project.

In general, the plays by these black women that were performed, were normally staged in community venues such as "libraries, churches, schools or clubs within the black community." (Perkins 16) Were it not for the stimulus offered jointly by Crisis and Opportunity, and the university department at Howard University which sought to encourage African-Americans in the dramatic arts in general, but particularly in playwriting, it is unlikely that any of the plays of the period by black women would have been available at all. The systematic recording of all winners has meant that black women playwrights efforts in dramatic writing have resulted in, if not a lengthy tradition of African-American playwrights, then at least a school of playwrights who were active in utilizing drama "as a weapon of social protest" (Harris 159).[27]

Johnson was the author of approximately twenty plays in total, according to Brown-Guillory (Their Place on Stage 14).[28] Of the four plays by Johnson which feature in Black Female Playwrights, all received some form of critical appraisal and recognition. In 1926, Blue Blood won an honourable mention in Opportunity. This was then produced by Du Bois' Krigwa Players in New York.[29] May Miller a playwright who is also featured in Black Women Playwrights performed in the production[30] In the same

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26 Marita Bonner wrote four plays The Pot Maker, published in Opportunity, February 1927; The Purple Flower, which won the 1927 Crisis drama award and was published in Crisis in 1928 and Exit: An Illusion published by Crisis in October 1929; Muddled Dream received no awards and remains unpublished.

27 Hay argues that the period of the Harlem Renaissance and what he perceives as the DuBoisian influence on African-American drama was crucial "because it compelled African American dramatists to address the political socio-economic issues of race" 19.

28 According to Perkins, Johnson wrote some thirty plays. There is no apparent reason for this discrepancy. Both Wines in the Wilderness by Brown-Guillory and Black Female Playwrights were published in 1990.

29 Hay confirms the plawrighting contests and adds "DuBois received hundred of scripts, many of which he published in his Crisis magazine. To make certain that the plays were widely produced, he established the Krigwa Players, a national little-theatre network. His contests not only provided these little theatres with one-act plays, but the contests also motivated other magazine editors to follow suit. In this context, DuBois, although a sociologist, was almost as important as Mr [Sterling] Brown." 84 Sterling Brown was a poet and eminent drama critic of African-American theatre during and after the Harlem Renaissance. See Sterling Brown, Negro Poetry and Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

30 For more on May Miller see Black Female Playwrights 141-144; Trudier Harris and Thadious M Davis , The Dictionary of Literary Biography Volume forty-one: Afro-American Poets since 1955

year Blue Blood was published in Fifty More Contemporary One-Act Plays. Plumes, Johnson's 1927 play won first prize in the 1927 Opportunity play contest. It was one of the few plays in the anthology to be produced off-Broadway in the same year by the Harlem Experimental Theatre Company. A Sunday Morning in the South, which addresses the issue of lynching and "has become the best known of Johnson's plays since its publication in Black Theatre USA: Forty-Five Plays by Black American Playwrights 1847-1974 (1974)" (Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 51) . Brown-Guillory maintains that Blue-Eyed Black Boy, a play which deals with the twin themes of miscegenation and rape has only recently been recovered along with her 1929 play Safe[31] - the drama of a mother who witnesses the lynching of a black man and subsequently murders her own son in order to prevent him from suffering a similar fate. Again Brown-Guillory iterates the fact that "[m]any of her plays, though unpublished were produced in church halls, lofts and schools in the Washington D.C., area." (Brown -Guillory, Wines in the Wilderness 12)

All Johnson's dramas are one-act plays and one could argue that financial, technical and artistic resources rendered it necessary for all tributary dramatists to keep to the one-act structure. If plays, as has been suggested by commentators, tended to be staged in non-theatre venues, with an amateur or semi-professional cast than it is unlikely that either the playwright or director would have had the time or the financial resources to sustain a long rehearsal period and an end product that wasn't abound with "crudities". In short, the black female playwright worked within sets of interlocking limitations: financial and technical which limited her ability to experiment with dramatic forms because she lacked a forum in which to experiment with theatrical ideas. Given that the women playwrights were working in a climate which saw the increasing popularity of the musical comedy and the legitimate drama on Broadway, a drama legitimised essentially by white men,[32]it must have been difficult indeed to bring such native dramas to the attention of either a black or white audiences.[33]

(Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1985). Harris and Davis give a detailed biography of Miller. Described as "a young playwright in the years between 1920 and 1940," Miller wrote plays that "would break away form the early crude renderings of blacks on stage and portray them with some measure of faithfulness to their daily lives" (241). She was a member of the Howard University Dramatic Club and won a prize on graduation day for her play Within the Shadow. In May 1925 she won the Opportunity third prize for Bog Guide. Hers was one of sixty-five entries in the magazine's first literary contest" In 1926, she won an "honourable mention in drama" in Opportunity for The Cuss'd Thing, also a one-act play. Her play Scratches was published by the University of North Carolina in Carolina Magazine. In 1927, as a member of DuBois' Krigwa Players, Miller performed in Johnson's award-winning Blue Blood at the One hundred and fifty-third Street Library in New York. Other published plays by Miller include Riding the Goat (1925), Stragglers in the Dust (1930), Harriet Tubman (1935), Christophe's Daughters (1935)

31 "Safe was lost until it was recovered in 1974" (Harris, Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 51)

32 Only three black male dramatists wrote successful Broadway plays in the 1920s. Garland Anderson"wrote the first full-length drama produced on Broadway by a black author." (186) His Appearances, or Don't Judge by Appearances, is a courtroom melodrama, about a black man who is falsely accused of raping a white woman. Appearances opened at the Frolic Theatre on

Burrill's association with Howard University's (she staged her annual presentation of The Other Wise Men there in the twenties) leads to an examination of the supportive role offered to playwrights by Howard University Dramatic Society.

According to Perkins, a number of black women playwrights "received their initial training in playwriting ... through the Howard Players" who were based at Howard University (7). It meant that novice black women playwrights were able to see their works produced in the "northeastern portion of the country" (7) The Howard Players were organised by Montgomery T Gregory and Alain Locke in 1921. Prior to the intervention of Montgomery and Locke black colleges "although occasionally including a course in play-production or playwriting, were slow to accept theater courses as part of the regular college curriculum" (Butcher 202). Consequently drama and the expressive arts in general were essentially extra-curricular activities. During the 1920s however, Howard University and a number of other colleges began to give academic credence to drama while increasing and improving facilities for the study of drama as an expressive art form. Howard University however lead the way in these endeavours.[34] In the words of Montgomery, he sought " with the enthusiastic co-operation ... [of] Alain Leroy Locke and the university officials ... to establish on an enduring basis the foundation of negro drama through the institution of a dramatic laboratory where Negro youth might receive sound training in the arts of the theater." (Montgomery 158) Acknowledging the role played by performers at *Harvard* University in terms of American drama, Montgomery and Locke sought to organise the *Howard* Players into a group that would give to "Negro drama" the same degree of significance and status. (The Howard Players had originally been formed around 1910 on an informal - extra-curricular basis - by the then Professor of English: Ernest Just.) The two men also established the first "National Negro Theatre in acting, playwrighting and production" (Perkins 6). Montgomery formed an advisory board that would validate the course, faculty and the Howard Players, thereby giving African-American drama within the university and on a national scale an even greater level of academic credence and professionalism. Perkins notes that "[t]he Advisory board ... boasted such individuals as Professor George Baker of the famous Harvard 47 Workshop, novelist Winston Churchill, playwrights Ridgely Torrence and Eugene O'Neill, Joel Spingarn of the

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October 13 1925 and ran for twenty-three performances. In 1930 the production opened in London, see Woll 9-10; Willis Richardson's The Chip Woman's Fortune (already cited) was performed by the Ethiopian Art Players at the Frazee Theatre on May 7 1923. It ran for sixteen performances, see Woll 42-42; Harlem by Wallace Thurman, is a realistic portrayal of blacks in New York, according to Woll (76). It opened at the Appollo Theatre on February 20 1929 and ran for ninety-three performances, see Woll 76.

33 See Thomas D Pawley, "The Black Theatre Audience", in The Theater of Black Americans (Volume II), 109-120. Here Bawley analyses and discusses the responses of the contemporary black theatre audience to popular and non-popular forms of theatre.

34 Butcher notes the following as examples of universities that began taking seriously the study of drama: "Fisk University, Spelman College, West Virginia Institute, Lincoln University (Missouri), Florida A. & M., and Morgan College are among the pioneers." (202)

NAACP ... Harvard University's President Charles W Eliot, Frederick Koch, director of the University of North Carolina Players, and Broadway designer Robert L Jones. James W Johnson was one of the few black to serve on the committee" (6) Of the seven black women playwrights in Perkins' anthology, only Marita Bonner had absolutely no connection with Howard University in one capacity or another.[35] The remaining six were intimately connected with the department or the university in general.[36]

As a tributary route to dramatic practice Howard University and the Howard Players were seen as fundamental steps toward the negro theatre. In his essay of the same title (1922), Locke celebrated the achievements of both institutions. For Locke what marked the "real coming of age" (Stewart 72) in negro theatre was the fact that the Howard Players now had a permanent resourced base. Consequently, for Locke, "the Negro Theatre [was] in its first tangible realization." (Stewart 72) With the development of the dramatic arts at Howard University, the Howard Players repertoire steadily increased as compared to previous years. Thus in 1920-1921, the Players performed three productions, including Ridgeley Torrence's Simon the Cyrenean and Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones. The latter performance starred Charles Gilpin in the title role. In 1921-1922, the Howard Players were able to double the number of productions that took place in a year. Arguably this was due to the university and the Players having increased resources in the dramatic arts. Plays included: The Canterbury Pilgrims Perey Mackaye; Strong as the Hills (a Persian play) by Matee Lake. Original student plays included Genefrede - a play of the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, by Helen Webb and The Yellow Tree by DeReath Irene Busey. (Stewart 73). The work of Montgomery and Locke was no short-term project. Hay acknowledges the debt contemporary institutions of higher education owe to the two pioneers when he states: "Locke's 1921 college theatre proposal had blossomed by 1992 into actor-training programs in almost all of the ninety-two "Historically Black College and Universities" (202).

This brief theatrical context and history of African-American theatre during the 1920s offers a framework through which to understand how the black women playwrights of the time were situated *vis-à-vis* writing for the theatre. They were differently positioned in terms of the theatrical establishment as a whole. Their aims were not purely commercial, neither purely aesthetic. The intention was to *educate* black and white audiences..

Three of the plays to be examined are by Georgia Douglas Johnson and one is by Mary Burrill. These plays are an example of the types of plays that were written as a

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35 Marita Bonner wrote four plays The Pot Maker, published in Opportunity, February 1927; The Purple Flower, which won the 1927 Crisis drama award and was published in Crisis in 1928 and Exit: An Illusion published by Crisis in October 1929; Muddled Dream received no awards and remains unpublished

36 I discuss these connections further on in the chapter.

result of the Locke/Montomery and DuBois institutions: A Sunday Morning in the South (1925) (hereafter Sunday Morning), Blue Blood (1926), Blue-Eyed Black Boy (1927) (hereafter Blue-Eyed). Aftermath (1928) was written by Mary Burrill.

Georgia Douglas Johnson and Mary Burrill along with a number of the women playwrights in the Perkins anthology were amongst Locke's "thinking negro" collective and had connections with the Harlem renaissance, even though as Brown-Guillory points out, a number of the women lived in Washington DC and had strong connections with the NAACP (4). Yet despite the geographical distance between Harlem and Washington, there was a distinct relationship between the Harlem and Washington literati, which gave rise to a rather curious phenomenon that W B Gatewood has documented under the title Aristocrats of Color (1990). He argues that:

> failure to consider class division in the black community is likely to contribute to ... the perpetuation of the myth that black society is a homogenous mass without significant and illuminating distinctions in background, prestige, attitudes, behavior, power and culture. (ix)

In the light of Gatewood's assertion, it seems important to chart the myriad literary social and intellectual connections between those in Washington DC and those in Harlem, in order to highlight the fact that the renaissance was not a maverick contingency of African-Americans "exploiting decadence to reap profit from the vogue in `things negro'" (Stewart 3). Such a literary and dramatic map might also be valuable for emphasising and foregrounding the influence and role played by the women who were a part of the renaissance movement.

The members of Gatewood's aristocrats of colour, known variously as "'colored aristocracy', 'black 400', 'upper tens', 'best society'" (ix),

> laid claim to elite status within a sub-group, the black Americans, by defining themselves in terms of prestige, tradition, culture, and other considerations reflective of values drawn from the white majority of American society. The aristocrats of color also dramatized the fact that there have been numerous variations of *the* black experience[37] (x).

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37 It is interesting to note Brown-Guillory's need to see the "mother playwrights" as largely unrelated to the Harlem renaissance. She points to the fact that Harlem was rarely source material for the playwrights and instead attempts to situate them as a more distinct female centred group of writers on the fringes of the movement. This is extremely misleading. The very fact, as Brown-Guillory states, of their education at Howard "a seminal [university] for training black teachers and artists" (4), points to the inevitability of connections with such figures as Locke, Du Bois *et al.* Furthermore, Gatewood describes Washington as "Washington: Capital of the Colored Aristocracy", "which included the Terrells, Grimkes ... Douglasses, and especially families associated with Howard University" (41); also 344-345; see also Bennett, The Negro Mood. Although Bennett does not refer specifically to the aristocracy of colour, he does detail the

Although Gatewood argues that the "coloured aristocracy" was not comparable with the white aristocracy, nevertheless, a social class of extremely wealthy black Americans formed the uppermost strata within the black class system. The social connection between the black women playwrights may at first appear tenuous. However, if one examines the educational institutions, out of which Locke's "thinking negro" emerged, it becomes easier to trace blood and social ties among the pioneers of both the dramatic and literary arm of the renaissance and the so-called aristocrats of colour.

Prior to their university educations, Graham *et al.* attended other educational institutions of some repute. Shirley Graham, for example, studied African music at the Sorbonne in Paris, and continued at the Oberlin Conservatory, a centre of excellence in music where she completed AB (*sic*) and MA degrees, before teaching in various established institutions of education.[38] Georgia Douglas Johnson also attended Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio. Previous to this, however, she attended public and private schools in Rome and Atlanta. Described by Perkins as "an inspiration and role model for the many black women writers who emerged during the 1920s" (21), she is noted for the 'S' Street Salon, where she hosted regular gatherings of the Harlem literati. Johnson's home, variously named 'S' Street Salon and Halfway House "was a Mecca for black artists and intellectuals" (Hatch and Shine 211) who were central to the Harlem renaissance: Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Alain Locke, May Miller, for example, are among those who attended Johnson's Salon.[39] Perkins points out that Johnson's father was "a well-educated and wealthy Englishman"(21).[40] Mary Burrill, some four years older than Johnson and twelve years younger than Graham, is one of the few women represented in the anthology not to have attended Howard University and/or the Oberlin Conservatory. Her educational background however was no less prestigious. Born and raised in Washington, Burrill attended the famous 'M' Street School and taught there, (as well as at other exclusive schools) for many years after graduating. 'M' Street itself appears to have been home to members of a number of the "coloured aristocracy". Gatewood refers to 909 'M' Street as the home of Senator Blanche K Bruce, a black senator from Mississippi who in 1875, on return from his four-month honeymoon in Europe was obliged to take up temporary

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educational background and tradition of African-American Establishment figures who are not dissimilar to the aristocracy of colour (41).

38 Shirley Graham married Du Bois in 1941.

39 Gatewood informs that Jean Toomer's grandfather was P B S Pinchback, "a man of substantial wealth", whose daughter, Nina, grew up in a world that her son Eugene (Jean) Toomer was later to describe as "existing halfway between the black and white worlds ... a gay, bright sweet life." (42-43)

40 See Amritjit Singh, The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976) (4); Singh verifies Perkins' statement and adds to the list: sociologist E Franklin Frazier, author of The Negro Family In The United States (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966) and Sterling Brown poet, critic and author of Negro Poetry and Drama and The Negro In American Fiction.

> residence near Howard University in the home of Virginia-born John Mercer Langston, who was in Haiti serving as United States minister. The Langston home, a fourteen-roomed house ... had for some years been the center of social life for Washington's black elite (6).

Gatewood notes that the only son of Senator Bruce also "attended Washington DC's famous 'M' Street High School whose academic standards attracted the children of aristocrats of color ... from other parts of the United States as well" (144).

The connections between the women, the Harlem renaissance and the aristocracy of colour become more apparent when one learns of how May Miller, a playwright who is also featured in the anthology, not only grew up within the confines of Howard University campus - her father was an eminent and respected Professor of Sociology and "founder of the Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard" (143) - she also taught at the high school attended by Burrill and Angelina Weld Grimke, before becoming a participant of Douglas' 'S' Street Salon.

These connections lead one from the Harlem renaissance to the grass roots politics of nineteenth-century abolitionists and early women's emancipation struggles. Angelina Weld Grimke was the great-niece of Sarah and Angelina Grimke, the nineteenth century abolitionists and suffragists "from South Carolina ... who most consistently linked the issue of slavery to the oppression of women ... The writing and lectures of these two outstanding sisters were enthusiastically received" (Davis 40-42). In turn Angelina Weld Grimke, whom Perkins mentions in the introduction to her anthology, wrote the feature length play entitled Rachel (1916), "Washington DC's ... first twentieth-century full-length play written, performed and produced by Blacks" (Perkins 8).[41] Rachel is a three-act protest drama set in 1900. The Lovings family are "genteel black family living in the North", (Hull *et al.*) their roots, however, are in the South where Rachel's father and half-brother were lynched. The play demonstrates that even in the North, blacks must continue to struggle and fight against racial oppression. Both Rachel and her brother Tom are well educated. A close friend of the Lovings, John Strong, who has a degree, insists that it is futile for blacks to aim for occupations for which they are educated. He urges Tom to become a waiter, as he himself has, in order to earn his living. Rachel is profoundly affected by the memory of her father and brother's death and later, a racist attack on her young charge, Jimmy, who she adopted when his parents died. As the play progresses she becomes more depressed and

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41 Angelina Weld Grimke, Rachel (1916) in Black Theater USA 137-173; see Brown-Guillory, (5) for a fuller explication of Rachel. Also Perkins, Black Women Playwrights 8-11; R J Fehrenbach, "An Early Twentieth Century Problem Play of Life in Black America: Angelina Grimke's Rachel" in Wild Women in the Whirlwind 89-107; Hatch and Shine (ed.) Black Theater USA "Angelina Weld Grimke (1880-1958)" 137-138; Hull, Color, Sex, and Poetry 117-128.

withdrawn. In the end she rejects a marriage of proposal and refuses to bring black children into the world.[42]

The play might well be viewed as a major dramatic feat, not because it was written by a black woman, but because it was most unusual, as has been demonstrated, for a non-commercial dramatic text to be full-length. It was commissioned by the Drama Committee of the District of Columbia branch of the NAACP. The committee consisted of Locke and Gregory among others, along with one Clara Burrill-Bruce. Both Burrill-Bruce and Grimke were intimately related to the "old families", that is the aristocrats of colour, and the early days of the NAACP. Angelina Grimke was the daughter of a Mr Archibald Grimke, a graduate of Harvard Law School and a founder member of the NAACP who "practiced what [he] preached in regard to amalgamation by marrying across the colour line" (Gatewood 178). He described the "upper strata of black society", as the

> The Four Hundred of Washington' ... and reminded his fellow aristocrats that it was their responsibility 'always to lift the lower classes upward.' [Since] `[n]oblesse oblige' ... 'is an infinitely nobler motto ... than that of Eat Drink and be Merry' (Gatewood 64).

Clara Burrill-Bruce also presents an significant link with the aristocracy of colour. She became the daughter-in-law of Senator Blanche Bruce, and was involved in racial politics at a local and national level. Alongside her husband's NAACP activities, she was involved with the New York League of Women Voters and "she occasionally published poetry in magazines such as Crisis" (Gatewood 329). Clara Bruce's maiden name Burrill would seem to suggest a blood tie with Mary Burrill, mentioned earlier, although Gatewood makes no mention of the Burrill family in his volume.

Attention has been drawn to the fact that the NAACP took the nature of its founding leader, W.E.B. Du Bois, described by Kenneth Clark as "dignified ... aloof ... in the tradition of a nineteenth-century New England aristocrat" (111). It is perhaps worth noting that Du Bois' recognition of those he termed the `Talented Tenth' (that is the most important intellectual and political figure-heads in nineteenth and twentieth-century Black America), came under a similar title to the aristocracy of colour, who according to Gatewood were also known as the 'upper tens'(xi). In fact, Gatewood argues that "long before Du Bois articulated the idea of the Talented Tenth, which

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42 Fehrenbach argues that Rachel received virtually no critical attention for over fifty years after its first publication in the 1920s. He does, however, cite a number of responses from "the white press" after its publication 96-96; and a response from H. G Wells in a letter dated December 6, 1921: "[m]any thanks for your play - a most moving one that has stirred me profoundly. I have long felt the intensity of the tragedy of the educated coloured people. Someday I hope I may find a way to help your folk." 97

claimed that blacks like other races would be saved by their exceptional members, the aristocrats of colour had been subscribing to and practicing a similar notion" (46).[43]

Thus the black aristocrats, which included members of Howard University, Harvard University, Oberlin conservatory, the Harlem renaissance, the NAACP, M Street School, Abolitionists, and women's emancipation communities and factions, constituted an intimate network of African-American men and women who were for the most part racially and socially integrated into the higher echelons of nineteenth and early twentieth-century life in the United States. Their overwhelming concern in most instances was the 'uplift' of the African-American population resulting in the term "race uplift".[44]

Both Alain Locke and W E B Du Bois anticipated Harold Cruse (1967) by some forty years in recognising the importance of the African-American dramatist. For both scholars, the role of the Negro dramatist had, of necessity, to be both artistic and political[45]. Race uplift, then, was the primary concern of the New Negro, but the form through which it was mediated differed according to the literary and/or political persuasion of the individual. Thus Hurston and other members of the self-styled "niggerati" were less interested in what they perceived as the sociology of race and more concerned to foreground a pure folkloric African-American artistic tradition, by recourse to folk and folk art.

Du Bois, the NAACP and the coloured aristocracy variously addressed race uplift and the need to demonstrate the universal nature of blacks and whites, what Brown-Guillory (1988) terms as "the best-foot-forward approach to black writing [which] includ[ed] only the best and the positive about blacks, generally middle class

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43 For Du Bois' explication of the Talented Tenth, see The Seventh Son, 2:385-404; see also Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, Ronald Hall The Color Complex (Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992) in which the authors note Du Bois' call to "produce a college-educated class whose mission would be to serve and guide the progress of the masses". This list included Ira Aldridge - actor, Frederick Douglass - anti-slavery activist, Sojourner Truth - underground railroad, Booker T Washington - Principal at Tuskegee, Bert Williams - comedian (31-32). Future references to this text will follow the citation.

44 Gatewood records the uplift activities of the aristocracy of colour 344-345.

45 Robert Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, argues that Locke's adherence to principles of aesthetics in Negro art and Du Bois' to propaganda has resulted in over-determining the split between them. He insists that the apparent difference between them was superficial (38). Presumably because both men shared similar ideas with regards to race, but their specific political and intellectual routes differed. Du Bois insisted "all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists...I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda". "Criteria of Negro Art" in The Seventh Son 2:319 (312-321) Alain Locke in "Art or Propaganda" responded with the following: "My chief objection to propaganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it.... After Beauty, let Truth come into the Renaissance picture, - a later cue, but a welcome one." (27-28)

blacks" (13).[46] By the same token, it would be untrue to suggest that upper class and middle class blacks were exempt from racism; "*Harpers Weekly* printed a cartoon grotesquely caricaturing an upper-class black wedding. The caption read: `Mr. Leon de Sooty, the distinguished Society Man, will to-day lead to the altar Miss Dinah Black, the beautiful heiress....'"(Gatewood 12) They were nevertheless a part of a black and white milieu that distinguished itself from the lower classes primarily in terms of `blood'.

Although neither Johnson nor Burrill were directly linked through birth to the old families of the coloured aristocracy, they were intimately connected with the writers, as many of the black female playwrights in the Perkins anthology were, through primarily social and political interaction. Despite this, however, there were those who felt that the issue of race uplift in general and racial oppression in particular were not the most fitting or appropriate themes to be dealt with in the theatre. Eulalie Spence "focussed on the lighter side of the black experience and avoided racial themes altogether." (Perkins 12) This native-born West Indian playwright insisted that:

> many a serious aspirant for dramatic honours has fallen by the wayside because he would insist on his lynching or his rape ... We go to the theatre for entertainment, not to have old fires and hates rekindled ... A little more laughter if you please and fewer spirituals (Perkins 13).[47]

Perkins notes that all Spence's plays are comedies and that she tended to focus on the theme of lovers triangles.

Differences of approach aside, it is clear that a number of women were targetted by Locke and Du Bois to write plays that dramatised issues of race and sought to redress the negative stereotypes of African-Americans by re-affirming and re-constituting a specifically African folk tradition. Sterling Brown (1937) also notes that black audience desire was predicated on "flattery instead of representation, plaster saints, instead of human beings, drawing rooms instead of the homes of people" (123) and pointed to the way in which the Irish theatre, primarily through W B Yeats, had also sought to "drive off the artificial stage Irishman [in return for] the true Irish peasant" (115). Similarly, Locke drew comparisons between Irish, Yiddish and Russian theatres insisting that just as in these instances ethnic dramas emerged from "the cultural programs of their

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46 I have already referred to those who felt that dialect, folklore and a stress on the African tradition only served to reinforce negative racist stereotypes. In addition Gatewood notes that there were those who felt that "respectable blacks should place a greater social distance between themselves and the masses" (23). The aristocrats of colour firmly believed that blood would be the final arbiter in terms of "good" African-Americans and the so-called worst elements of the race.

47 Eulalie Spence's Fools Errand was performed by Du Bois' Krigwa Players in 1927. It reached the finals of a drama competition. The Krigwa Players did not win but Spence won a Samuel French prize for the best unpublished manuscript.

respective movements, so had the Negro drama to emerge from the racial stir and movement of contemporary life" (Stewart 88)[48].

These comments in turn were a result of the way in which representations of African-Americans in the theatre were continually subject to debilitating stereotypes that spoke to the perceived inferiority of black people. Arguably it was for this reason that some rejected the return to the folkloric tradition in literary and dramatic writing. Although the black performer was applauded by "the typical white audience [that wanted] stereotypes" (Brown 123), these stereotypes were frequently grounded in images of the African native as comic and pathetic.

Brown develops the link between the Irish in England and the African-American in America arguing that because of the not dissimilar social position that each occupied within mainstream society, the "Negro seemed doomed to be the comic relief of plays sadly in need of comedy" (103). Brown-Guillory argues that primitive and exotic representations of African-Americans resulted in African-American performers being relegated to musical comedies, so that the musical became wholly representative of and/or by African-Americans for a predominantly white audience (2);[49] and while Max Rheinhardt in an interview with Locke only perceived the "special genius" of the African-American in musicals, he also acknowledged that the very same genius was being "prostituted to farce, to trite comedy" (Stewart 77).[50]

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48 See also Tracy A Mishkin "Black/Irish: Comparing the Harlem and Irish Renaissances". Diss Michigan University, 1993, in which the writer draws comparisons between Irish and Harlem renaissances, calling attention to the need to discuss African-American literature *inter-* as well as *intra*-culturally.

49 She further emphasises this by arguing that "[s]tereotypes, ... once given birth did not die easily (2).

50 Clarification is needed here. Despite the approbation of contemporary black scholars towards the musical comedy in America during the early twentieth century, it must be remembered that it was extremely popular with black audiences. The musical comedy was a traditional theatrical form born out of black face minstrelsy and vaudeville; both of which were popular with lower class black audiences. According to J W Johnson in Black Manhattan, a number of musicals gave rise to African-American actors who became internationally acclaimed, for example, Josephine Baker, jazz singer and actress, actor Charles Gilpin, actresses Evelyn Ellis, Edna Thomas and Anita Bush all "helped to place the Negro fairly and squarely on Broadway" (173). The intermediate period that James maintains occurred between 1910 and 1917 gave rise to so-called legitimate or serious drama because the segregation of blacks from Broadway theatre resulted in a concentration of Negro drama in Harlem 170-181. However he also notes that "all through this intermediate period, there were times when polite comedy and high tension melodrama gave way to blackface farce, hilarious musical comedy and bills of specialities. The Black Harlem audiences enjoy being thrilled, but they also wanted to laugh. And a Negro audience seems never to laugh heartier than when laughing at itself - provided that it is a *strictly* Negro audience" (173). This is an important observation, but one that created contradictory responses within the Harlem renaissance. On the one hand there was the recognition that popular African-American forms appealed to the lower classes, while the bourgeois were intent on presenting what was presumed to be the more "respectable" side of the race. It mirrors once more the schism within the movement that resulted in the younger Negroes, such as Wallace Thurman and the "Niggerati" rebelling against the more conservative figures in the movement. Houston Baker in Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, offers important critical reassessments of vaudeville and black face minstrelsy. Through a series of

Rejecting the imposition of white audience desire, Locke *et al.* sought to displace popular conceptions of the Negro performer as one who "can express himself only by music and rhythm" (Gates, Figures in Black 225), by inviting the New Negro dramatist to offer alternative representations of the Negro and Negro life, because according to Locke, the real future of Negro drama lay with the folk play (Stewart 89), and "a peasant folk art pouring out from under a generation-long repression is the likliest sub-soil for a dramatic renascence" (James 86).

II Re-plotting The Nature of Miscegenation and Lynching

The plays under discussion were written between 1919 and 1930. They are short one-act plays, which, rather like the melodramas of Victorian England work towards the revelation or climactic moment before the curtain falls on the performance.

In this section, two prominent themes that recur in the plays will be examined: miscegenation and lynching. Miscegenation was one of the issues that James Weldon Johnson, in Black Manhatttan (1930), described as the "last taboo", because it involved sexual relations between blacks and whites. The outcome of the "last taboo" resulted in a mulatto (male) or mulatta (female) child. According to Russell *et al.* (1992) mulatto means "hybrid" and denotes a person of mixed racial heritage; but because the term is linked to slavery it has wholly negative connotations. "The word "mule" is similarly derived from the Spanish for "hybrid", and came to serve as a metaphor for a cross between the refined White plantation owner (thoroughbred horse) and the lowly, inferior black slave (donkey) (7). There were other words aside from mulatta/o which spoke very specifically to the obsession of naming and situating those who had less than one hundred per cent "white blood". Thus while mulatta/o referred to a person who had one half black blood, quadroon referred to a woman, child or man with one-quarter black blood. Octaroons had one-eighth of black blood.[51]

In Black Theater USA Hatch and Shine state:

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complex models of reappropriation, he examines the way in which the minstrel mask "constitutes a primary move in Afro-American discursive modernism" 15-24. Alain Locke, in "The Negro and the American Stage" 79-86 and "Broadway and the Negro Drama" 93-100, in The Critical Temper of Alain Locke, also acknowledges the uniqueness and importance of the black vaudevillian actress and actor; See also David Savran Breaking The Rules: The Wooster Group (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988) (30). Future references to this text will follow the citation.

51 Russell *et al.* point to the fact that octaroon balls were held on a regular basis in Charleston and New Orleans. At these events, "[l]ight- skinned beauties, called 'fancy girls' were auctioned" (18). Octaroons were perceived as exotic.

> Miscegenation is the one racial theme on which black and white playwrights have always agreed: mixing is bad. The official white myth ran like this: Mixing of the races was bad for whites although it might improve the Negro. Nevertheless, on stage, persons of mixed blood must die, even if the black blood be but one drop. (184)[52]

In Christian's words (1980), "the mulatto is tragic" (16).[53] Consequently, African-Americans of mixed race parentage, known as mulattoes, octaroons or quadroons were represented as tragic figures in both the literary and dramatic genre and served as a warning to the black and white spectator of the dangers inherent in mixing blood. According to Brown (1937), the repeated tragic outcomes of mulattoes and octaroons, though stated romantically, supported the belief that mixing the races was a curse, even though white audiences were apparently more sympathetic to such characters because they were "nearer to themselves racially".[54] In Blue-Eyed and Blue Blood, Douglas explores miscegenation from a different and altogether more subversive perspective. Instead of focussing on the perceived tragic circumstances surrounding the life of the mulatto character, she examines instead miscegenation as the sexual exploitation of black women by white men. In so doing, she foregrounds a racist and sexist historical motif in which the black female body was characterised as a contested sexual site, during slavery

> Sexual exploitation during slavery was contingent upon white supremacist ideology, which viewed the African-American enslaved woman as already always sexualised and bestial. The native woman, it was observed, had a physiological constitution which differed from that of "normal" women, that is white women. Thus a quasi-physiological connection was made by forging a link between the physique and genitalia of the female African slave and the ape or orang-utan from which, by all accounts, she had only recently descended. The black woman as sexual icon is rigorously explored by Sander Gilman in his essay "Black Bodies, White Bodies", in which he argues that classic works of nineteenth century art offered representations of "the black female ... [as] an icon for black sexuality in general", and that this gave rise to the image of the black female as Hottentot and prostitute.[55] The sexualised black

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52 See also Black Manhattan 193-5, in which James describes the moral outrage that erupted three months before the first performances of All Gods Chillun (1924), by Eugene O'Neill. The moral indignation arose because the white lead actress Mary Blair had to kiss the hand and fondle the hair of black actor Paul Robeson. Johnson reports that media hype also contributed to the situation with such headlines as "Riots Feared From Drama", and an editorial stating: "It is hard to imagine a more nauseating and inflammable situation ... the failure of the audience to scrap the play and mutilate the players would be regarded as a token of public anemia" 193-4.

53 Christian further examines the mulatta figure in nineteenth-century antebellum America, see "The Rise And Fall of The Proper Mulatta", in Black Women Novelists 35-61.

54 Brown, himself of mixed race parentage, argues that too often the purported psychological perplexities of mulattoes were misconceived and exaggerated beyond recognition (113). Others writers of the period who treat the complexities of so-called miscegenation include Zora Neale Hurston, Colorstruck (1926); Nella Larsen, Passing also by Nella Larsen Quicksand.

55 Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies", in "Race" Writing And Difference (231).

female body became fetishized, both discursively and scientifically, so that, in the first instance, "[t]he antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the black, and the essential black ... [on] the lowest rung [of] the great chain of being [in the form of] the Hottentot" (Gilman 231); and in the second instance, that is scientifically, images of the Hottentot gave rise to a fascination with the genitalia of black women resulting in scientific paradigms that viewed as pathological the black female corpus.[56] The image of the black female slave with a rapacious sexual appetite became justification for the brutal and dehumanising (physical) acts of violence meted out to her on a regular basis, particularly rape. As Angela Davis (1982) points out,

> [t]he punishment inflicted on women exceeded in intensity the punishment suffered by their men, for women were not only whipped and mutilated, they were also raped.... To intimidate and terrorise the women, slaveowners encouraged the terroristic use of rape in order to put Black women in their place (Davis 23-4)

In both Blue Blood and Blue-Eyed the text exposes the rape of free black women. Douglas shows how the demeaning treatment of black women was not so very different from abuse during slavery.

In Blue-Blood, two mothers, Mrs Bush and Mrs Temple, are soon to become sisters-in-law. The scene opens with Mrs Bush preparing food for the wedding guests, while her daughter prepares herself for the ceremony. Before long, she is joined by Mrs Temple, a rather domineering woman who, believes that her son, John Temple is marrying beneath his class position. Both mothers in a battle for high status brag about the refined blood of their respective mulatto children. Absurdity turns to tragedy when the last moment reveals that both women in previous years were raped by the same man, "the biggest banker in town ... CAP'N WINFIELD McCALLISTER"(41).

In Blue-Eyed, a mother sends her future son-in-law to "fly over to Governor Tinkheim's house" (50), with a ring, in order to avert the mob lynching her son, "the finest looking black boy in the whole town" (48). The son, Jack is the only one in the family with blue eyes. When the troops are heard marching to the jail, the family and friends realise that the lynching has been successfully averted and that Jack has been spared his life. It is evident at the end of the play that Jack's real father is the Governor

In both play-texts, alternative views of the relationship between black women and white women, black women and white men are offered as a counterpoint to the mainstream ideology of the sexualised black woman. The revelation that both women have been raped by the same man results in a dramatic shift from comedy to a dawning realisation of the horrific circumstances of their past lives and the tragic consequences

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56 This paradigm resulted in autopsies on black female bodies in the nineteenth-century, the most famous being the autopsy of Sarah Bartman. Her dissected genitalia continue to be displayed at the Musee de l'homme in Paris.

of the future, should their children marry one another. The very title Blue-Blood is an ironic reminder that the notion of blue blood for both of the black women is here seen as an historical paradox, because contrary to the view that slave women lured slaveowners for sexual gratification is another which acknowledges the fact that miscegenation was a result of rape.[57] Mrs Bush, who could be characterised as the New Negro's idea of the "folk" character, then resorts to somewhat suspect discursive strategies in an attempt to elevate her daughter May to an equal social position to John Temple. Mrs Temple's seemingly over-inflated pride in her son, coupled with Mrs Bush's eulogising of her daughter's refined blood, is both ironic and tragic. In the desire to oust the other from her pedestal, each forgets the circumstances under which both children were conceived:

> Mrs Temple: ... You'll have to admit that girls will envy May marrying my boy John.
>
> Mrs Bush: (stopping her work suddenly, and with arms akimbo). Envy MAY!!! Envy MAY!!! They'd better envy JOHN!!! You don't know who May is; she's got blue blood in her veins (41).

Douglas' short dramatic text reveals the persistent lie about the supposed paternalism and philanthropy of the white supremacist society of the time. It was often presumed that slave women attracted or aroused the sexual appetites of their owners who simply displayed normal sexual urges, and took advantage of a situation that would appease both parties.[58] Johnson, however, introduces the idea that, in actuality, all black women were under the threat of being raped, not only by slave owners - but by so called educated, and respectable white men. Thus when Mrs Temple, "almost collapsing", tells Mrs Bush that "Once ... I taught a country school in Georgia" (43) and goes on to explain that McCallister raped her, the point being made here is that all black women were vulnerable regardless of their social status. The differing social status's of Mrs Temple and Mrs Bush become a testimony to that. Douglas creates for the spectator of the time an image of a younger Mrs Temple who was virtuous, educated and correct. Her only fault would appear to be the fact that she naively assumed that a white banker, who offered her help as she was working and saving for her wedding day, would offer his professional services without want of a return. She explains to Mrs Temple "[o]ne day, in that bank, I met a man. He helped me. And then I see he wanted his pay for it. He kept on - writing to me. He didn't sign his letters ... I wouldn't answer . One night he came to the place where I boarded (43).

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57 Angela Davis in Women, Race and Class supports this view when she argues that "it is sometimes ... assumed that slave women welcomed and encouraged the sexual attentions of white men. What happened between them therefore was not sexual exploitation, but rather "miscegenation" (125).

58 See bell hooks, Ain't I A Woman. She argues that it was often presumed that "white men had 'normal' male sexual desires that they indulged in with submissive slave girls" (29). See also n26.

Cap'n McCallister,"that 'ristocrat uv' 'ristocrats ... that Peachtree Street blue blood" is, however, shown to be beyond reproach precisely because as Douglas goes on to demonstrate; rape, by definition meant the rape of white women only:

> Mrs Temple: There wasn't anyone there that cared enough to help me ... (43),

that is to say there were no witnesses to validate her charge of being raped. There was however "the woman where I boarded", but as Mrs Temple points out, "she helped him - he bribed her" (43). In this instance, Douglas demonstrates the fact that the white woman shared the same assumptions as McCallister himself: that in any case, black women invited the sexual attention of white men. As Mrs Temple says to Mrs Bush: "you know yourself ... what little chance there is for women like us, in the South, to get justice or redress when these things happen!"(43)[59]

Douglas subverts the image of the respectable white male aristocrat, and the notion that good black women were exempt from what Davis asserts is a form of terrorism specific to women: namely rape. It might also be inferred from Johnson's drama - she is the only playwright in the anthology to bring together the different social classes - that she is also rejecting the predominantly male thesis which asserts the goodness and superiority of the aristocratic class, and the unproblematic distinctions that the coloured aristocracy made between `good' and `bad' Negroes. Much was done by the aristocrats of colour to distinguish themselves as a class distinct from the lower class blacks, and Johnson's links with the group would have made her aware of this distinction. While they were concerned to uplift the black race and promote its progress, there was a prevailing view which held that there were worst elements of the race, who were beyond being uplifted.[60] These worst elements were generally considered to be those who did not strive for the highest spiritual and moral values irrespective of their social conditions. Committed to the idea that blood will tell, some members of the aristocracy believed that there was the opportunity of "proceeding to do the next best thing under the circumstances" (Gatewood 17) which would lead to salvation from an inferior social status. Those who were unable to rise above their situation by adopting correct attitudes and behaviour, were seen as unredeemable, on account of their inferior blood. By questioning the moral status of the aristocratic Cap'n McCallister, Douglas does away with the simplistic notion of good and therefore superior blood, bad and consequently inferior blood, and calls into question representations of black

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59 See Eugene Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll. In his discussion of the rape of enslaved black women Genovese maintains that "[r]ape meant, by definition, rape of white women, for no such crime, a rape of a black women, existed at law. Even when a black male sexually attacked a black woman, he could only be punished by his master; no way existed to bring him to trial or to convict him if so brought." (33)

60 This point was dealt with earlier in the chapter. For further clarification see Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color 17-18.

womanhood which thus far had been viewed as the prime instigator of white men's sexual drives.

Douglas also offers a critique of white women's identification with negative representations of black women, albeit covertly.[61] In accepting the bribe from McCallister, the woman (not described as being black or white, but the inference is clear), is wholly complicit in the rape and sanctions it, thus upholding the sexist and racist views of the white community with regard to black womanhood.

In Blue-Eyed, written sometime in the 1930s, Johnson returns to the rape of black women by upper-class, so-called respectable white men who bear all the hallmarks of honesty and integrity. In this one-act play of two and a half pages, Mrs Pauline Waters, the mother of Rebecca and Jack has obviously been involved with Tinkheim, the Governor of the town, although the nature of the involvement is never mentioned in the play but remains as a mystery. In Blue-Eyed, as with Blue Blood, the mother is placed in the harrowing situation of having to rescue her child from disaster, or in this case, death, at the last moment. Once again, Douglas highlights the complicity of white women in the rape and murder of black women and men respectively. By giving the white woman the power to avert the violence and death and shifting the turn of events to a less harrowing premise, Douglas highlights the power that white women had in relation to African-Americans. Mrs Waters' friend reports: "[t]hey say he done brushed against a white woman on the street. They had ... [an] ... argument and she hollowed out he attacked her" (49).

The mysterious connection between the blue-eyed son, Mrs Waters and the Governor is further developed when, on hearing the news of Tom's execution, she sends her future son-in-law to the Governor with a ring:

> Mrs Waters: *(Feverishly tossing the odd bits of jewelry in the box, finally coming up with a small ring. She turns to Dr Grey)* Here Tom take this, run jump in your buggy and fly over to Governor Tinkheim's house and don't let nobody - nobody stop you. Just give him the ring and say, Pauline sent this, she says they going to lynch her son born 21 years ago, mind you say twenty one years ago - then say - listen close - look in his eyes - and you'll save him (49-50).

On presenting Dr. Grey with the ring, one immediately questions the nature of her relationship with Governor Tinkheim. The very fact that she has a ring which will serve to re-awaken events in his memory, suggests that perhaps the ring was a token of love, in which case, Mrs Waters was not raped, but rather involved with Tinkheim in a loving relationship. Although the play was written some time in thirties, it attempts to

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61 Something that has been repeatedly observed by contemporary black feminists, including Davis, hooks, Lorde, who variously foreground and challenge the role of white women in colluding with racist patriarchs and/or racist ideology.

examine the nature of relations between white men and black women by recourse to the historical continuum. Thus, it was not unheard of, though rare during slavery, for masters to apparently form a genuine attachment to their female slaves or concubines. Some going so far as to free, even marry them and raise their children under their own name.[62] Russell *et al.* give two examples of men who to varying degrees lived openly with their Black female mistresses. A white son was angered when it was discovered that his father, William Adams, had stipulated the freedom of his mistress and her children on his death. The will was challenged in court, and "[t]he judge declared Nancy [the mistress] and all of her children to be part of the son's estate.(19) In the second instance they cite Thomas Jefferson, sworn in as the third United States president in 1801, as having affair that lasted well over ten years with mulatta Sally Hemings; a slave and daughter of "a beautiful mulatto concubine" (19). According to the Russell *et al.*, Jefferson's affair is not proven, yet they maintain that Sally

> continued to live at the Monticello, his Charlottesville estate, and over the years she bore five more light-skinned children ... some biographers now think that the father of Sally Hemings' mulatto children was one of Jefferson's nephews not Jefferson himself. But then why did Jefferson's will allow only Sally's children, of all the slaves on his plantation, to go north to freedom? (20)

The case of Sally Hemings is however an exception. It was also known that in an attempt to validate and *civilise* the sexual favours that they desired, white slaveowners and overseers would approach their slave women with gifts in an attempt to make them acquiesce. Often, if they did not, they were still subject to "brutal sexual exploitation"(Russell *et al.* 21). While it was common knowledge that white men raped black women both enslaved and free, and kept others as concubines, it was scandalous to admit to having fathered their children (Jacobs 51) In sending the ring to Tinkheim,

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62 This is a provocative assertion because it is always in danger of being misconstrued as the complicity of enslaved black women in relation to the slave master or overseer. However, Genovese for example insists that "[m]any white men who began by taking a slave girl in an act of sexual exploitation ended by loving her and the children she bore. They were not supposed to, but they did - and in larger numbers than they or subsequent generations of white and black southerners have ever wanted to admit" (415). Davis, however, in Women, Race and Class attacks Genovese's claim arguing that it is both paternalistic and inappropriate to view this as an act of compassion or humanitarianism, considering the economic disparity between the two, in which the white man was always the powerful instance 26. Peggy Phelan in Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London: Routledge, 1992) raises the point however that "[t]he combination of psychic hope and political-historical inequality makes the contemporary encounter between self and other a meeting of profound romance and deep violence. While cultural theorists of the colonial subject and revisionary meta-anthropologists have thrown welcome light on the historical pattern of the violence of this encounter, we still have relatively little knowledge of the romance nestled within it." (4) See also Harriet Jacob's Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987 [Boston: 1861]. Jacobs documents her life as an enslaved woman and recalls the master who, determined to make her his concubine, alternately threatened and beat her while at the same time cajoling her to submit to his many advances, see 80-85, in which she describes the masters' "Continued Persecutions". Future page references to this autobiography will follow the citation.

Mrs Waters makes explicit to Tinkheim her intention of revealing his past, no matter how it might reflect on her:

> Rebecca: (*Wringing her hands*) We got to do something - (*Goes up to Tom*) do you know anybody else - anybody at all who could save him?
>
> Mrs Waters: Wait, wait - I know what I'll do - I don't care what it costs (*To Rebecca*) Fly in yonder ... and get me that little tin box out of the left side of the tray in my trunk - hurry - fly ... (*Rebecca hurries out, while Dr. Grey and Hester look on in wonderment*) (49).

The scenes with the Governor take place offstage, and the sound of troops marching in to break up the mob is reported by Rebecca, but it is clear when she exclaims that "It's the State troops - the guards - they're coming" (51), that Tinkheim, in a bid to save himself from the scandal that would befall him if the events of his past were known, has averted the lynching of Jack and consequently has admitted to an involvement with Mrs Waters. The unspoken dialogue between Tinkheim and Mrs Waters is crucial, not only for Jack's life, but as an underlying current in the drama as a whole. It is an instant in which the lie about black womanhood in the nineteenth century, perpetuated by a deeply sexist and racist white supremacist society, is confidently unmasked by Mrs Waters who gains for herself and the black woman of the time a moral victory.

The absence of dominant male figures is a recurring one in the dramatic texts of Douglas and other playwrights in the anthology. Since many of the plays in the anthology and the four under consideration here are set around the time of the civil war, or during the World War One, it might be conjectured that the reader/spectator is to assume that fathers and/or husbands were away fighting. The absence of the dominant male figure in the domestic lives of African-American families has been a major source of debate for many black and white sociologists, psychologists, historians, especially post-World War Two, when, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the so-called pathology of black families in the United States came under increasing scrutiny.

In her chapter "The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for A New Womanhood", Angela Davis revises the popular notion of the so-called black matriarchal family and observes that both black and white sociologists in the 1970s, "when the debate re-emerged, reiterated the thesis that slavery had effectively destroyed the Black family"(13), and that black women had emasculated their men by continuing to assume dominance within the family. Davis, however, offers a variant to this commonly held view. She argues that domestic life and the family were of crucial importance to black women because here was

> the only space where they could truly experience themselves as human beings. Black women, for this reason - and also because they were workers just like their men - were not debased by their functions in the way that white women came to be. Unlike their white counterparts, they could never be treated as "mere" housewives (27).

This might go some way to explaining why the women characters in the plays of the period are usually situated in the domestic sphere - quite apart from the fact that it provided the landscape of their daily lives. In the case of Blue-Eyed and Blue Blood, the absence of the men need not be viewed immediately as a negative sign,[63] because the presence of the mulatto children in the family, conceived through rape, offers testimony to the fact that the black men and women, were intent on "humanizing an environment designed to convert them into a herd of subhuman labor units" (Davis 15). In Blue Blood, the women discuss the unequivocal support that Paul Temple gives the young Mrs Temple while recognising his powerlessness in the situation,

> Mrs Temple: I told Paul Temple - the one I was engaged to - the whole story, only I didn't tell him who. I knew he would have tried to kill him, and then they'd have killed him.
>
> Mrs Bush: That wuz good sense.
>
> Mrs Temple: He understood the whole thing - and he married me (43)

Similarly, in Blue-Eyed, although the father is dead, the mother and daughter talk about the respect accorded to them by fellow churchgoers because of the father.

> Rebecca: Everybody in the Baptist Church looks up to us don't they?
>
> Mrs Waters: Sure they do. I ain't carried myself straight all these years for nothing. Your father was sure one proud man - he is put on a pinnacle (47).

One can presume that Mr Waters was also aware of his wife's rape and that he, like Paul Temple, also "understood the whole thing". Thus, far from being a fractured and incohesive unit, the black family negotiated ways of creating the family so that

> every day choices made by slave women and men -such as remaining with the same spouse for many, years naming or not naming the father of the child, taking as a wife a woman who had children by unarmed fathers, giving a new born child the name of a father, an aunt, or an uncle, or a grand-parent contradicted in behaviour, not in rhetoric, the powerful ideology that viewed the slave as a perpetual "child" or a repressed "savage" (Davis 15).

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63 One could speculate that social analysts such as Moynihan might have viewed the absence of a dominant male figure in the plays under consideration here as pathologically characteristic of the black family.

An analysis of Douglas' dramatic text reveals the ways in which she attempts to challenge the sexist and racist presumptions about black people in general and black women in particular. Her concern with racial pride and race uplift is shown by Hatch and Shine to go beyond a dramatisation of blighted African-American and into her daily life where she challenged not only the racism of whites but the internalised racism of blacks (211). In her short dramatic texts, as she replaces popular misconceptions of blackness and femaleness with more positive representations of black women, composite, illuminating and altogether more positive representations of black men of the period also come into view.

In both plays the fathers, who effectively adopt the sons of white men, demonstrate quite clearly their understanding of the woman's brutal sexual exploitation. In agreeing to marry her and give the child that she carries their own name, they, contrary to the prevailing representations, embody the characteristics and qualities of integrity, compassion and so on, that the slaveholding white class are shown to lack.

Douglas, "the leading figure in the area of historical drama during the Harlem renaissance" (Brown-Guillory 13), offers dramatic reconstructions of African-American lower class women in such a way as to suggest a re-presentation and re-definition of black women. The ideological positioning of black women as sexualised is challenged and subverted in Blue Blood and Blue-Eyed and results in questioning the very premise upon which representations of black female identity were constructed. Despite Sterling Brown's (1937) belief that Blue Blood "is a somewhat far fetched treatment of the results of miscegenation" (128), the dramatic text might also be viewed as an attempt by the two women to re-value the incident of rape by deliberately re-producing a reverse discourse on illegitimacy. This would demonstrate the way in which black women opted for survival as a strategy, and not the status of victim. It would also highlight the way in which black women as a community sought to preserve positive representations of themselves, despite the demeaning circumstances that they were forced to endure.[64]

Given the movement towards race uplift and the role of the New Negro during the renaissance, it is no coincidence that almost all the plays by the playwrights in the anthology feature children. The future generations of African-American children are either described as studious, or are striving to become doctors, or teachers in order to gain a respectable position in society. In Blue-Eyed, Mrs Waters expresses her pride in having a doctor for a future son-in-law:

> Mrs Waters: Yes, and I'm shore proud - now here you is getting ready to marry a young doctor (48).

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64 See also bell hooks, Ain't I A Woman which examines the way in which newly manumitted African-American women adopted the social codes and patterns of the white community and were still subject to ridicule and aggressive behaviour in Northern and Southern states 55-58.

She demonstrates this pride and trust when he arrives to change the dressing on her infected foot. Groaning playfully she chides:

> Mrs Waters: Now don't you be kidding me doctor - my foots been paining me terrible - I'm scared to death I'm going to have the lock jaw....Well I'm tickled to have such a good doctor for my own son(48).

Likewise in Blue-Blood, Randolph Strong, the young man whom Mrs Bush would rather her daughter married is also a doctor. It is evident that May herself is more in love with Randolph, but has come to terms with the fact that the well-placed John Temple is probably a more sensible and lucrative proposition.

> Mrs Bush (*To Randolph*) `Tween you and me, I shorely do wish she'd a said `yes' when you popped the question las' Christmas. I hates to see her tying up with this highfalutin' nothing. She'll re'lize some day that money ain't everything, and that a poor man's love is a whole sight better than a stiff-necked, good-looking dude (39).[65]

That May is in love with Randolph becomes clear when on her first entrance, she "dashes a something like a tear from her eye", on seeing the bunch of white roses that Randolph has brought her (40). Once the revelation of the fathers has been clarified by the two mothers, it is the doctor who at the last minute decides to run away with her and get married, to Mrs Bush's cry of despair that "it's the black women that have got to protect their men from the white men by not telling on `em"(46). Similarly, in Blue-Eyed it is crucial that Jack is not lynched, not merely because of the grief, loss and sense of injustice that the family would necessarily endure, but because he also represents the future generation of African-Americans. Just as Blue-Blood ends, with the possibility of a new generation of black people being born into an educated class, with the prospect of being educated and the ability to re-write, indeed re-read the African-American history, so too Jack who, according to his mother earlier on in the play, "says he's going to quit running that crane - and learn engineering ... just give him a book and he's happy" (48).

The notion of being educated, and the need for the younger generation of African-Americans to become educated, goes much further than the idea of securing a good career for economic and material welfare. It is intricately bound up with the power to recognise oppressions that are racially and ideologically implicated. Arguably perceiving education as a ready tool for emancipation is problematic, if only because, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, the institution of education might be seen as an ideologically biased structure that seeks to reproduce an ideology that serves its own interests, that is the ideology of the dominant and/or ruling group; in this instance, the white community. However, it needs to be remembered that Douglas and the majority

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65 This last speech could also be seen as a critique of the "stiff-necked" African-American aristocrats.

of the other literary and dramatic writers of the renaissance had undergone privileged educations, that had given rise to self-determining images of African-Americans such as the New Negro and Du Bois' Talented Tenth. It is perhaps only to be expected that education was viewed as the partial route to race uplift, socio-racial equality and consequently liberation.[66]

If, as Davis argues, rape was an institutionalised method of sexual coercion "that became so powerful ... it managed to survive the abolition of slavery" (175), then lynching, "reserved during slavery for the white abolitionists" (Davis 185) became an institutional form of terrorism designed for black men.

Sunday Morning (1924) and Aftermath (1919) because of the periods in which they are set, namely after World War One and some sixty to seventy years after the abolition of slavery, require a brief historical context before a closer discussions of the plays themselves.

In both plays, the violence of lynching that is reported or impending is a reflection of the violence that was occurring in America around the time that the plays were written, particularly in the case of Aftermath. In her essay "Rape, Racism and the Myth of The Black Rapist" (1982), Davis observes that with regard to the increase of lynchings, the myth of the black rapist was not a "spontaneous aberration [but] a distinctly political invention" (184). She also observes three key moments when the incidence of lynching increased: during the early to nineteenth-century (when anti-slavery campaigns gained in influence and popularity), after the abolition of slavery, and post World War One as the "economic structure took shape" (186). From this it can be surmised that lynching increased in direct proportion to the increasing presence of freed black men. This final point is verified by Genovese who maintains that "for blacks, the danger of lynching remained minimal until after emancipation.... The direct power of master over slave [meant] ... they had little need for extralegal measures against blacks. It also meant slaves had protections against the mob ... (32). In other words, the greater the threat of black men becoming freed citizens of America, the greater the need to curb and control them by white supremacists. This is at least one

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66 In response to Booker T Washington's entrepreneurial drive towards vocational education for African-Americans, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, Du Bois insisted that "[w]e must watch with grave suspicion the attempt of those who, under the guise of vocational training, would fasten ignorance and menial service on the Negro for another generation. Our children must not in large numbers, be forced into servant class. ... It is our duty, not drastically but persistently, to seek out colored children of ability and genius, to open up to them broader, industrial proposition and above all, to find that Talented Tenth and encourage it by the best and most exhaustive training in order to supply the Negro race and the world with leaders, thinkers and artists" (49) "The Immediate Program of The American Negro", in The Seventh Son 2:45-49. For more on the Du Bois-Washington education debate, see John White, Black Leadership in America 1894-1968 (New York: Longman 1985); Aristocrats of Color, 302-311; C L R James, "Black Power", in The C L R James Reader 365-367 W.E.B. Du Bois, The Talented Tenth, (New York: James Pott & Co., 1903).

way of perceiving the situation, one which highlights "the way ideology transforms to meet new historical conditions" (Davis 186).

The spectacle of lynching, it could be argued, also formed part of the ideology if only because, as a brutal form of public execution sanctioned by white supremacist ideology, it demonstrated the coercion and power that hitherto had been maintained by the institution of slavery. As Davis points out "lynchings were represented as a necessary measure to prevent Black supremacy over white people - in other words to reaffirm white supremacy" (186). A typical example of the spectacle of post World War One lynching is offered by Thomas Slaughter

> A witness remembered that Walker's cries could be heard over half a mile away. Three times they threw Walker into the flames and three time he clambered out screaming and begging to be let go. Members of the mob pushed him back a fourth time and he died in the flames. By all accounts, no one tried to stop the horror that night ... one newspaper commented on the politeness of the crowd - how men stepped aside to give women and children a better view. Some waited long after Walker was dead for the ashes to cool and then collected pieces of his bones as souvenirs of the event. By and large, the community's passions were spent. There was general satisfaction that 'justice' was done, although the policeman's widow did complain that she was not accorded the ceremonial privilege of lighting the fire.[67] (184)

Lynching then, which Davis shows emerged at crucial historical moments of burgeoning emancipation for black people, was an institutionalised act of aggression and coercion that involved the mutilation of black men's bodies as completely as rape was a form of sexual coercion and control of black women's bodies and sexuality. Just as "the female genitalia came to define the [black] female for the nineteenth century ... and the polygenetic argument [became] the ideological basis for dissection" (Gilman 235), so too the male genitalia came to define the African-American man, in the form of the "shocking and blasting charge ... [of] rape" (Davis 186), a charge that also resulted

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67 Thomas P Slaughter, Bloody Dawn: The Christiana Riot And Racial Violence In The Antebellum North (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) (184). There were a number of riots and lynchings both before and after World War One, that resulted in mass protest demonstrations by African-American and campaigns by leading African-American figures. In Black Manhattan J W Johnson details perhaps the most famous being the East St. Louis massacre on 2 July 1917 in which six thousand blacks were driven from their homes, which were then burnt down. Hundreds were murdered. This was followed by a silent protest on 28 July 1917 by ten thousand people in New York (236). Johnson also reports that in 1919, "eight months after armistice, with black men back fresh from the front, there broke the Red summer of 1919" (246); The NAACP journal, Crisis, sent Du Bois to investigate the East St. Louis massacre. He cites a number of personal testimonials of African-Americans from St. Louis, Seventh Son, 2: 88-106; Ida B Wells and James W Johnson were leading activists against the lynching of black men in the nineteenth and twentieth-century. See Ida B Wells On Lychings: Southern Horrors. Davis cites Wells' first pamphlet against lynching, published in 1895: A Red Record. See also James Weldon Johnson's autobiography Along This Way.

in an ideological base for dissection, or more specifically, mutilation of the black male body, through lynching[68].

Sunday Morning and Aftermath examine lynching from two different perspectives. The former, along with Blue-Eyed, thematises lynching by centralising what Davis describes as the myth of the black rapist; a myth that was ideologically perpetuated so that "lynching [became] explained and rationalized as a method to avenge black men's [supposed] assaults on white ... womanhood"(186). Aftermath draws more specifically on the mob riots and lynching that occurred around the time of World War One. The myth of the black rapist, that Sunday Morning and Blue-Eyed employ in their narratives, could not have been perpetuated unless there were firmly established within white supremacist ideology complementary images, or more appropriately iconographic notions of white womanhood as well as of black woman and manhood, thus establishing a rectilinear framework in which each icon might work in tandem with or in opposition to its racial counterpart.

Christian (1980) explains the relevance and symbolic weight that the white woman carried and this would seem to be crucial to an understanding of the ideology that supported the institution of lynching within a patriarchal framework. Christian details a mythical representation of white womanhood in post-civil war America, a period also known as the Reconstruction era. According to Christian white womanhood and black womanhood represented two diametrically opposed representations of woman that were contingent upon one another; so that, [t]he image of the southern, lady based as it was a patriarchal plantation myth, demanded another female image" (9), one that would function in a binary oppositional way, ensuring that (white) self and (black) other were defined in relation to each other sexually, mentally and emotionally. Thus Christian suggests that the image of the "alabaster lady", in which white womanhood came to represent delicacy, virginity and timidity (8) was only ideologically effective because of the counter-representation of the black mammy who was

> "[e]nduring strong and calm ... black in color as well as race and fat, with enormous breasts she is strong ... but this strength is used in the service of her white master and as a way of keeping her male counterparts in check; she is kind and loyal, for she is a mother; she is sexless, for she is ugly; and she is religious and superstitious, because she is black" (Christian 12).

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68 Despite the false cry of rape, Davis points out that during the American civil war, when white men were away fighting, not one charge of rape was brought against black men who were alone with white women; see Russell *et al.* The Color Complex who illustrate the point quite clearly when they state that if black men were discovered having an affair with a white woman, "they could be whipped, *castrated* or murdered for defiling 'the sanctity of white womanhood'" (23) (emphasis added). Wallace in Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman points out that "[t]he American black woman is haunted by the mythology that surrounds black men. It is a mythology based upon the real persecution of black men: castrated black men hanging by their necks from trees ... black men with bleeding genitals jammed between their teeth (15-16).

The mammy was not the only representation of black women that functioned as a correlate to white womanhood. Christian details other images of black women that served to define the white woman positively in relation to the black woman (or the black woman negatively in relation to the white woman); especially in terms of sexuality. Russell *et al.* take a more liberal view of the situation to argue that "White men longed to escape the suffocating effects of a Christian ethic that equated sex with sin ... [and] often experienced their first real sexual pleasure as men in the arms of black women" (18). This image however does not acknowledge the fact that above all the slave was viewed predominantly as chattel, "to all intents, constructions and purposes whatsoever" (Goodell 233). It seems unlikely then that white men sought the "arms" of black women in the way that Russell *et al.* describe and much more likely that they sought the "ass" of black women in the way that Ntozake Shange describes.[69] It is a point verified by Christian, who describes the image of the "loose black woman" who unlike the alabaster lady "possesses an `evil' disposition, a characteristic that constitutes rather than distracts from her sexiness ... She is good-looking and passionate, but never beautiful"; and unlike the white woman who uplifts men with her beauty, the loose black woman "ensnares them with her body" (15).

With the image of white and black womanhood in place, the fear of black men corrupting white womanhood reached exaggerated proportions. As Russell *et al.* point out, black men who were sexually involved with white women at any level could be brutally punished and/or murdered for "defiling `the sanctity of white womanhood'" (Russell *et al.* 23) A sanctity that was both mythical and ideologically constructed.[70] That the allegation of supposedly attacking a white woman always culminated in lynching is full testimony to this fact. Whether the lynch victim had or had not touched, brushed past or attacked the white woman was unimportant. What is evident here is the way in which female bodies, black and white, variously became the site of power struggles between black and white men. However, in order to effect white, patriarchal supremacy, the myth of the black rapist needed to emerge in opposition to that of white men as protectors. It is another example of the way subjective and racist-sexist representations of African-Americans always found their binary opposites in equally biased representations of white women and men, in order to maintain the system of master-mistress and slave. In Sunday Morning, when the white girl is shuffled towards

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69 See Claudia Tate, Black Women Writers. In her interview with Claudia Tate, Ntozake Shange argues that black women have ever been defined in terms of their sexual and/or domestic capabilities (17).

70 bell hooks argues that for the most part, the iconographic images of black and white womanhood have retained their currency, alongside racist and sexist ideology. Assessing a situation that arose out of national day-time television in American, hooks observes that white Americans "reacted with outrage and anger when a day time soap, ... aired a program in which a respectable young white male was shown falling in love with a black female. [Because] if a large majority of that small group of white men who dominate decision-making bodies in American society were to marry black women, the foundation of white rule would be threatened." (Ain't I A Woman 64)

her alleged attacker by the second officer, it goes without saying that she will name Tom Griggs, not merely because it was the done thing to pick any black man at random to die a savage death, but because the society was so well structured, the iconography of white womanhood and black manhood so clearly established, that the presence of the convicted black man in front of the always "innocent" white woman inevitably ended in death by brutal execution. Furthermore, because African-Americans were viewed as being indistinguishable from one another (with the exception perhaps of the coloured aristocracy), Burrill demonstrates that any African-American man could be lynched for a false charge of violence against a white woman/white womanhood. This idea informs Sue Jones' plea to the officer in Sunday Morning when she urges: "Mr Officer, that white chile ain't never seed my granson [*sic*] before - All Niggers looks alike to her"(35).

This also goes some way towards an understanding of why factions of the aristocracy of colour were so determined to make clear distinctions between themselves and lower class blacks who were without the means to counter white supremacist domination in any way. It was not only out of snobbery, but also out of a need to present variables of African-Americans and their relationship to the white community. Gatewood quotes from a pseudonymously written book by a Joseph Willson, brother-in-law to Senator K Bruce, who "hoped to disabuse whites of their inclination to `regard people of color as one consolidated mass, all huddled together, without any particular or general distinctions, social or otherwise, and to hold the errors and crimes of one ... as the criterion for the character of the whole body'"[71] (Gatewood 10). As Gatewood argues, the degree of unity "purported to be evident among African-Americans was quite contrary to reality"(10). What the aristocrats were able to do as a result of their class and wealth was to pursue an education, in order "to insure a place at the top of the black social structure" and arguably avoid the more racially instigated violence that lower class blacks suffered.

Despite the focus which Johnson gives to this particular aspect of lynching, African-American men were also lynched for other, often trivial, events. Aftermath deals with the way in which lynching was always, in reality, a threat, whether there were white women around or not, although the white woman as victim was the most common excuse. Set in 1919 the play opens with Mam Sue and her daughter Millie discussing the latter's ability to prophesy future events by reading burning logs in the fire. As the dialogue unfolds, it becomes apparent that the father of the family is dead and that Millie has refused to tell her older brother in her letters to him, while he has been away fighting in the war in Europe. The play opens on the night of his surprise return. The younger brother, Lonnie runs home to tell the family that the plane has

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71 A volume entitled: Sketches of The Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia by "A Southerner" 1841.

landed and that John will be home for two to three hours before departing again. Realising that at some point the father's absence will have to be explained to her eldest son, Mam Sue questions Millie, who replies:

> *(going to Mam Sue and kneeling softly at her side)* Mam Sue, don' let's tell him now! He's got only a li'l hour to spen' with us - an' it's the firs' time fu' so long! John loved daddy so! Let 'im be happy jes a li'l longer - we kin tell 'im the truth when he comes back fu' good. Please, Mam Sue!! (61)

John's decision at the end of the play to go and shoot the culprits is born out of the fact that the town sheriff, the governor, did not intercede and offer his father a trial. He was "burnt down by the gum tree.. [for getting] in a row wid ole Mister Withrow 'bout the price of cotton" (65) and striking back at Withrow. His anger is fuelled by the fact that he has been highly commended and decorated with stripes for his brave efforts during the war, only to find that the country for which he fought during the war was at the same time murdering his family at home, or if not actually participating in the brutal murder, then sanctioning it. Thus on arriving home, he finds that the attitudes towards the black community have not changed. He can wear his war commendation and decorations with pride, but he will not be treated or considered an American citizen because he is black.[72] On returning he is faced with a situation which has not changed since the end of the civil war in 1863, that is, the realisation that African-Americans are still an enslaved people. He also discerns a further illogical premise that drives him to hunt out his fathers' murderers

> You mean to tell me I mus' let them w'ite devuls send me miles erway to suffer an' be shot up fu' the freedom of people I ain't neveah seen, while they're burnin' and killin' my folks here at home! (65-66)

The burning of John's father for arguing with Mr Withrow and striking him back after being struck by the latter does seem excessive in the extreme. While it is possible on the one hand to perceive the logic behind the ideology of black and white womanhood, in the case of John's father a different explanation or logic is required. There is the temptation to view the lynchings *in toto* as the arbitrary and sadistic

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72 An African-American audience might well have made the connection between Aftermath set in 1919, the character of John and those African-American soldiers who formed the 15th Regiment during World War One. The 15th Regiment were based in France and due to racist opposition from white American soldiers were stationed with French troops and fought with the French, as the 8th corps or the 4th French army and became the vanguard. At the end of the war, African-American soldiers of the 8th corp. were highly commended for their services; a number were decorated with the *Croix de Guerre*. They were also cited for their excellence. Mam Sue's comment would seem to support this when she says of John: "He's won de War Cross! He fought off twenty Germuns all erlone an' saved his whole comp'ny an' the gret French Gen'rul come an' pinned de medal on him, *hisself*!" (59). See Black Manhattan, 231-279 for more details of the 15th Regiment. Here Johnson also discusses the letter that was sent to the French informing them of how to treat black soldiers (245). See also "The Black Man In The Revolution of 1914-1918", (May 1919) in The Seventh Son 2:107-157

behaviour of the dominant culture of the time, the almost insane raging that ensued in the face of a black man being accused of a crime cannot be dismissed out of hand as an action with no grounding in racist ideology.

Of the plays in the anthology, Perkins insists that "[i]t would be unfair to view these plays based on technical and creative skills alone. The main objective in presenting these works is to illustrate how these plays conveyed the attitudes of black women - issues that were rarely voiced on the stage at the time." (2) The plays of Burrill and Johnson are essentially naturalistic dramas which seek to subvert thematically as opposed to formally and stylistically. Writing in 1926, Locke acknowledged the fact that Negro life had for so long been shrouded by the "melodramatic intensity of the Negroes group experience", to the point that dramatic representation of that same experience resulted in "dull mass contrasts of the Negro problem" (Stewart 87). Burrill and Johnson attempt to separate out the "dull mass" by developing and thematizing a black and female perspective on issues such as the sexual exploitation of black women, "racism, miscegenation ... illegitimacy" (Brown-Guillory 13).

In so far as the dramas are propaganda plays however, they attempt to challenge the dominant ideology of the time in order to demonstrate its inherently flawed and dubious manner of construction. A construction that is founded on the self-proclaimed supremacy of whites over blacks purely on the basis of skin pigmentation. Blue Blood for example while examining miscegenation as a form of sexual exploitation also highlights the need to question such related elements as the conveniently phrased *partus sequitur ventrem*: the child follows the condition of the mother.[73] For *partus sequitur ventrem* also had its allotted role within the white supremacist ideological framework. While on the one hand it permitted and sanctioned the continued rape of slave and free black women, white men were exempt from naming or having any responsibility for the children they fathered. But there were farther reaching implications and long term ramifications. It ensured that all the so-called mulatta/o offspring born to black women were slaves, with no possibility of claiming to be the son or daughter of a white man and therefore no hope of being acknowledged as a rightful heir. If the *partus sequitur ventrem* order had not been passed as legislation, then the illegitimate children of the white masters might well have claimed (by virtue of the fathers' sexual exploitation of

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73 *Partus sequitur ventrem* was a nineteenth-century legislative act which held that the child biologically speaking was accorded the same racial condition as the mother. Stanley Elkins, Slavery 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), makes the point that along with other legal categories, marriage and the family "defined the status of the American slave". *Vis-à-vis* enslaved African-Americans in the nineteenth-century, "the most savage aspects of slavery from the standpoint of Southern practice (and thus, to a certain extent, of law) had become greatly softened [but] that most ancient and intimate of institutional arrangements, marriage and the family had long since been destroyed by the law, and the law never showed any inclination to rehabilitate it" (52-53). It should be noted that Stanley Elkins is notorious for his liberal assessment of the institution of slavery.

black slaves), their freedom and a share of his wealth and capital. More importantly however, *partus sequitur ventrem* ensured that since the mother was the property of the master, any children she bore also came under his ownership. It made black women's bodies the most profitable means of production during slavery and gave to the slave owner lucrative returns in the manner of slave children, especially mulatto children who were particularly prized for the lightness of their complexions[74].

Partus sequitur ventrem however was a privilege reserved strictly for white men, since if the same rights were offered to black men, and taken literally, it would have led to what the white patriarchs feared most: black men fathering children by white women. This is another reason perhaps why the protection and control of white women and white womanhood in general became exaggerated and murderous in its nature. Arguably, if black men had decided to act in the manner of their white counterparts, but towards white women, then the *partus sequitur ventrem* order would have imposed a role and condition on white motherhood that was hitherto unspeakable: bestowing on the mulatto child the status of the pure white heir, without contestation.[75] Thus in focussing on one aspect of miscegenation, Johnson calls into question a nexus of other issues which surround the predominant theme.[76]

Mary Burrill demonstrates similar narrative devices in Aftermath, rather more overtly perhaps than Johnson does in Blue Blood. For Burrill views "retaliation with violence" (Brown-Guillory 9) as a means of foregrounding the violent injustice of lynching. Burrill's retaliatory ending in Aftermath, aside from advocating the "code of an eye for an eye" (Brown-Guillory 9), also demonstrates the ways in which the socio-racial disparity between black and white Americans is not only to do with a notion of the inferiority of the former relative to the latter but more to do with the ideological slant of a so-called democratic system that continued to deprive basic constitutional

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74 Russell *et al.* argue in The Color Complex that "[a]pproximately ten per-cent of the more than 400.000 slaves in the south before 1860 had some degree of White blood. Yet since mulattoes brought the highest price on the slave market, even among slaves those with the lightest skin had the highest status, especially on larger plantations.... Coveted indoor assignments ... were nearly always reserved for mulattoes, while the physically gruelling field work was typically left to slaves who were dark skinned. (18).

75 Elkins, despite his questionable sympathy towards the institution of slavery, clarifies my point here and contends that "[h]ad status been defined according to the father's condition ... there would instantly have arisen the irksome question of what to do with the numerous mulatto children born every year of white planter-fathers and slave mothers. It would have meant the creation of a free mulatto class, automatically relieving the master of so many slaves on the one hand, while burdening him on the other with that many colored children whom he could not own. Such unequivocal relationships were never permitted to vex the law" (55). In a manner typical to his critique of slavery, he also challenges the notion that "planters deliberately 'bred' their slave women", arguing that this fact has never been substantiated (n55).

76 Arguably, a contemporary audience would have been familiar with *partus sequitur ventrem* and would perhaps have recognised more immediately that the reverse discourse of Mrs Temple and Mrs Bush in Blue Blood was in some ways redundant especially in the face of the child following the condition of the mother.

rights to African-Americans for political motives. It is for this reason that Davis argues that "the institution of lynching ... complemented by the continued rape of Black women, became an essential ingredient of the post[civil]-war strategy of racist terror. In this way ... the political domination of Black people as a whole was ensured" (185).

In analysing these plays, the intention has been to avoid the rather dubious representation of strong black women toiling single-handedly under the oppression of slavery and sacrificing what little they had for their children, while praying to God to see another day. The black women in the plays of Douglas and Burrill are not represented in this way and it would be grossly misrepresentative to wrench such images into view. It is not only their so-called strength and endurance that needs to be admired. Millions of black women, born and sold into slavery endured, the same plight and oppressive regime. As hooks rightly points out:

> When people talk about the `strength' of black women, they are referring to the way they perceive black women as coping with oppression. They ignore the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation (hooks, Ain't I A Woman 6)

What also needs to be examined are the varying ways in which black women negotiated or more accurately, *strategized* within the framework of the society that sought to dehumanise them. For strategy, which can take a multitude of forms, requires tenacity vigilance and a profound understanding of precisely how the structures of oppression work. Without this understanding, survival is based purely on endurance, and, by all accounts, surviving the domination and control of racist ideology in antebellum and Reconstruction America required more than endurance.

The dramatic texts of the New Negro women playwrights can be seen as alternative representation of lower class African-American reality. These alternative representations seek to overhaul what Locke described as the myth of the old Negro; s/he who was a stereotype, "more of a formula than a human being" and who seemed to be caught between "moral debate and historical controversy" (Stewart 7). In keeping with the racial philosophy of the Harlem intelligentsia the plays seek to uplift the race by articulating the voices of the folk who, because they occupied an unfavourable social position relative to the coloured aristocracy/intelligentsia in general, and whites in particular, were the most exploited and disadvantaged by the machinery of white racist supremacist ideology.

In the following chapter, my intention is to continue the theme of black women playwrights and to examine the way in which dramatic and literary representations of resistance to white supremacy and sexual exploitation of black women's bodies might

be seen directly to inform the ways in which black women playwrights have sought to establish African-American female subject positions that are radical and subversive.

CHAPTER THREE

INFANTICIDE: STRATEGY FOR RESISTING OPPRESSION

Introduction

At the 1979 Second Sex Conference in New York, Audre Lorde made two important observations with regard to feminism in the academy. She observed that differences between white "american [*sic*] women" (Lorde 110) and Black women, lesbians, and Third World women were not acknowledged in any significant (political) way, and she maintained that this relative indifference was a direct result of "academic arrogance" (Lorde 110).

Writing ten years later, Christina Crosby (1989) observes that the 1979 conference served to

> mark the emergence of a sharp and strenuous critique of feminist criticism and theory developed largely by women of color [so that], "Differences" has become a given of academic feminisms; feminism has been modified and pluralized. No longer one, feminisms are marked by nation and race ... by class, ethnicity, sexuality: black feminism, latina feminism, lesbian feminism, middle-class "mainstream" feminism and so on. (131)[1]

In short, at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, feminism within the academy became a contested site amongst feminist scholars both in Europe and in the United States, amongst black women, white women and women of colour. The specific site of contestation was the category of "woman" and its corollary, feminism. In "An Open Letter To Mary Daly" (1979), Lorde, writing in response to Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology, acknowledges that "the oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries" (70) but she refutes "[t]he assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background.... " (69) Lorde rejects the notion of a universalised notion of womanhood and feminisms which can address both the commonalities and differences of black and white, lesbian and heterosexual women. Thus the concept of "we" as feminists, or "we" as women, became a problematic point of reference, and has also come to require clarification, racially and sexually. A refusal to name the social group(s) or categories that inform one's day to day existence will, according to Lorde,

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1 Christina Crosby, "Dealing With Differences", in Feminist Theorize The Political (eds.) Judith Butler and J W Scott (London: Routledge, 1992) 131. Future references to this volume will follow the citation.

result in "a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (116).[2]

Thus Denise Riley (1988), questions not only the category of "woman" but the notion of the "social" as constructed during the Enlightenment age. She argues that, "like the modern collectivity of 'women', mutual references can be traced to a complicated post-1790s gestation"(49). Riley raises important questions about the collective and political terms "woman" and "feminism" and, like Crosby, she looks to the ways in which history has constructed and fixed, or stabilised, both terms to the degree that they remain unchallenged and for some unchallengeable. In defiance of the notion of 'a sisterhood', Riley argues for a rejection of 'women' as a category, "[as] the only way of avoiding these constant historical loops which depart or return from the conviction of women's natural dispositions ... [in order] to make a grander gesture - to stand back and announce that there *aren't any* 'women' ... " (2). Instead she suggests an interrogation of "all definition of gender" (2) as the most crucial undertaking for feminist inquiry.

What is discernible here is the gradual disappearance of any stable notion of a political collective for women, but as Riley argues, this instability "need not worry us" (5).[3] Instead such a negation might be viewed as a form of "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (Haraway 66).[4] This would seem to suggest or allow for a gender politics that is constructed as much on the basis of difference as it is on commonalities, without totally dismissing the historical and material conditions of the subject. It might also serve as a challenge to a materialist

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2 See Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." Socialist Review 15 (1985): 65-107. Haraway is careful to situate her useage of "us" in inverted commas and questions "who counts as 'us' in our own rhetoric?"(73) She also challenges the term "woman" and calls for the identities of those who are included or excluded from it. See also Nicole Ward Jouve, introduction to White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue (London: Routledge, 1991).

3 In rather less reassuring terms Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous were making similar assertions in the mid-early 1970s. See Toril Moi, Sexual Textual Politics (London: Methuen, 1988), in which Moi argues that Kristeva refuses to define `woman', because she insists that "to believe that one 'is a woman' is almost as absurd and obscurantist as to believe that one 'is a man'. Though it is necessary to fight patriarchy in the name of 'woman' it is important to recognise that a woman cannot be" (163). Future references to this text will follow the citation. See also Hélène Cixous, in her celebrated essay "The Laugh of The Medusa", in New French Feminisms (eds.) Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Sussex: Harvester, 1981) 245-264. Cixous also refuses definitions - more specifically of female sexuality, arguing that "you can't talk about *a* female sexuality " 246.

4 I am aware of the way in which discourses begin to overlap. There is the danger of slipping into a generalised post-modernist discourse. Haraway also draws attention to this, arguing that the very term "women of color constructs a kind of post-modernist identity out of otherness and difference", adding that "this post-modernist identity is fully political, whatever might be said about other post-modernisms" (73). I am reluctant at this point to develop the theories of post-modernist feminism particularly in relation to black women and women of colour. However, I take on board the post-modernist influence on black female subjectivity in the third section of the chapter specifically in relation to the postmodern feminist arguments of Nancy Caraway.

feminism that privileges gender as the sole reason for women's oppression and allow for a gender politics that perceives the myriad of differences in a single female subject as the basis for articulating feminisms. Such a politics will rely on the "shifting mosaic" (Hill Collins xiv) of individual identities as opposed to the perception of the individual as a monolithic construction.[5]

This chapter examines the ways in which materialist feminist theories might be arrested from an arena of collective intent and reconsidered in such ways that might give rise to radical interpretations of black female subjectivity. Black female scholars have long since articulated the double, triple and, of late, multiple dilemmas that arise as a result of being black and female, but the question remains: What are the specific ways in which black women resist being reduced to a set of multiple dilemmas. Audre Lorde claims to transform silence into action as poet warrior while at the same time reserving the right to be self-determining (40). This is one means of challenging racism, sexism and homophobia within both black and white communities. Black women playwrights of the 1920s, however, saw the theatre and playwriting as a means of articulating interlocking forms of oppression in order to challenge the racist and sexist assumptions of white hegemonic rule. The conventional melodramatic form, coupled with the pleas of the underclass or black folk community for justice, might lead to the play's moral tone dominating it's subversive intent.

More recently, however, contemporary black women have sought to avail themselves of the role of moral precursor and offer instead complex and non-conventional modes of production that seek to challenge and resist race and gender oppression while at the same time subverting forms and structures of (white hegemonic) cultural production that militate against black culture and history. Ntozake Shange is one example of a contemporary black feminist playwright whose form and style demonstrate a resistance to "standard English" and by implication mainstream white and patriarchal perceptions of reality.

Toni Morrison is also another example of a contemporary black woman writer who "interrogate[s] a continuum of attitudes towards racial difference", (Wisker 83) by deliberately subverting conventional thematic assumptions that demean African-American culture and history. For this reason Morrison's Beloved is included in the chapter. While it might be viewed as out of place in a predominantly theatre based thesis, it might be justified here because of its marked thematic similarities to Shirley Graham's It's Morning - a dramatic text written and published in the 1940s. More

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5 Here too I remain attentive to the way in which I construct my own ideological premise in order to advance my own argument. I am not suggesting or aiming to construct a definitive feminism but remain conscious of the fact that "the woman inquirer interpreting, explaining, critically examining women's condition is simultaneously explaining her own condition" (Butler and Scott 135).

importantly, however, despite the forty years between the publication of the two texts, Morrison and Graham both privilege the black female body and dramatise through the narrative its struggle to overcome definition by white mainstream culture. Both texts also view the black female body as inextricably interlinked with the history of the African-American culture. I shall refer to Beloved as a source text and prime example of the ways in which African-American women writers re-define the parameters of African-American history by re-membering[6] the African-American struggle for African-American emancipation via recourse to the black female body and subjectivity.

African-American women do not feature so much as playwrights in the 1940s. This is not to deny the fact that black women playwrights existed; Alice Childress, for example, was a prolific playwright and actress of the time; instead African-Americans began to form theatre companies, or collectives following the demise of the Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)[7] and sought to organise a theatre so that "beginning

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6 Re-membering is often used in reference to Morrison's Beloved in which a mother slaughters her infant daughter, who later returns as a ghost to haunt the family. It also suggests, of course, a re-constituting of the body.

7 The Federal Theatre Project was a government-backed theatre movement which sought to "reverse the aristocratic posture of earlier theatrical operations" (Ross 34) The project was developed by the Roosevelt administration during the depression, when it was publicly acknowledged that the theatre of the 1920s had repeatedly refused to "alter its traditional thinking and practices" (Ross 33). The result was a theatre institution that was pre-eminently bourgeois in an age when television, but particularly film, was gaining in popularity. Added to which, the latter two media were cheaper than theatre tickets. In his essay "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939", in The Theater of Black Americans (Volume II) (ed.) Errol Hill, Roland Ross maintains that "[i]n the battle for the cultural dollar, the theatre's patently non-democratic development worked against its own continued existence." By the time of the depression in the thirties, "[p]atronage, the very lifeline of the theatre, disappeared as wealthy philanthropists 'shifted their dwindling fortunes into more practical uses.'" (Ross 34) In response to the undemocratic institution of theatre, the Federal Theatre Project developed a revolutionary tenor. It aimed to make theatre accessible to the masses and this was done by establishing and developing ethnic theatre units "so that these groups would be able to do plays of their own literatures and cultures ." (Woll 204) The Federal Theatre project's national director was Hallie Flanagan. According to Ross, the very fact of her being, as a woman, the overall executive director pointed to the revolutionary nature of the Project. A number of ethnic minority communities had their own units; there was a "French theatre in Los Angeles ... German theatre in New York City ... Italian theatre in Massachusetts, New York City and Los Angeles [and] Negro theatre[s] in several cities " (Ross 36). According to Woll, the Federal Theatre Project also sponsored African-American theatre projects across the United States in twenty cities as well as "dance programs, classical plays, musical revues, marionette shows, drama - presented both traditionally and experimentally, though experimental productions were favored as being more economical."(Abramson 45) The Federal Theatre Project's greatest contribution to the development of "Negro Theatre was in "its honest attempt to develop black playwrights who could express life in their own vernacular" (Woll 204). Playwrights such as Abram Hill, Theodore Browne, Laura Edwards Frank Wilson, became resident playwrights with Federal Theatre Project black units. (I refer to a number of these playwrights further on in the chapter). Abramson acknowledges the positive influence and support offered by the Project to African-American playwrights and cites a 1936 event in which the directors of the Negro Theatre Project 806 in New York City "decided to invite one hundred Negro writers" (47) to attend a series of lectures and workshops over a four month period to help them improve their playwrighting techniques. Some fifty black playwrights attended the first month's symposium. The Harlem unit of the Federal Theatre Project has also been remembered for the following productions: Macbeth, set in Haiti "complete with voodoo chants and dances" (Abramson 47).The Swing Mikado, Run,

playwrights could see their plays performed, and actors, stage managers, set designers, and assorted technicians could grow proficient through unpressured and error-laced trials." (Hay 172)[8] It could also be argued that African-American audiences had become attuned to more realistic portrayals of black life as offered by the Federal Theatre Project. Consequently, one could argue for the ways in which companies such as the African Negro Theatre company began to cater for *African-American audiences* "who expected to see authentic dramas about black life." (Hull *et al.* 284).[9] In her essay "The American Negro Theatre", (1980), Ethel Pitts Walker argues that "the idea of a theatre in Harlem for Black people was central to the conception of A.N.T. As Alice Childress has said: 'We thought we were Harlem's theatre.'" (53)[10] The American Negro Theatre was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Until the grant ended in the late 1940s, the company "was housed in the basement of the 135th Street Library, [Harlem] where Du Bois' Krigwa Players had had their headquarters almost twenty years earlier." (Abramson 93) The Company was founded by Frederick O'Neal and Abram Hill late in 1939.[11] According to Hay, the "American Negro Theatre sent to Broadway and Hollywood the likes of singer-actor Harry Belafonte [and] actor-director Sidney Poitier"

Little Chillun, Stevedore, Big White Fog. Production details of these performances can be traced Dictionary of the Black Theatre 162-163, 140-141, 157-158,16-17. For more detailed information on the Federal Theatre Project as a movement, see Doris Abramson, :Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 1925-1959 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) 45-46, 83-85, 91-95. Future page references to this text will follow the citation. Roland Ross, "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939" 33-49; The Critical Temper of Alain Locke 264-265, 274-277; Rena Fraden, Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); George Kazacoff, Dangerous Theatre: The Federal Theatre Project as a Forum for New Plays (New York: Lang Press, 1989); John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown (eds.) Federal Theatre Project: 'Free, Adult Uncensored' (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980);The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar of Productions Compiled by the Staff of the Fenwick Library, George Mason University. (London: Greenwood Press, 1986); Glenda Gill, White Grease on Black Performers: A Study of the Federal Theatre of 1935-1939 (New York: Lang Press, 1988).

8 Woll substantiates this points. He believes that the company provided "experience for writers, actors, directors, stage managers and the like during the 1940s." (xv) He cites Anna Lucasta, a comedy, as enjoying a long and successful Broadway run in 1944.

9 My point is substantiated by Abramson in Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre. Abramson maintains that it was as a result of the experience gained through working with the Federal Theatre Project that African-American playwrights developed the incentive "to establish their own theatre companies in Harlem during the forties". (91) She also acknowledges the fact that "[t]hese companies ... were also formed in the tradition of early attempts by Negroes to have their own theatre: the Lafayette Players early in the century, the Krigwa Players in the twenties, the Rose McClendon Players in the thirties, to mention a few possible prototypes for the new ventures." 91

10 Ethel Pitts Walker, "The American Negro Theater", in The Theater of Black Americans Volume II 49-63. Walker also offers a detailed historical analysis of the company.

11 Frederick O'Neal, as well as being one of the founders of the American Negro Theatre, was also an actor in the company. He received the New York Critics Circle Award and a Clarence Derwent Award for his performance in Anna Lucasta (1944) . He continued to work in film and theatre until the late sixties according to Woll 240. Abram Hill started his training as a medical doctor before becoming side-tracked "by his love of theatre." (Woll 215) He was a member of the Rose McClendon Players and playwright for the Federal Theatre Project. Woll notes that "Hill was instrumental in organizing the American Negro Theatre in June 1940. The company's first production was Hill's On Striver's Row, which ran for 101 performances." (215) Hill continued to write and adapt plays for the theatre until the seventies.

(172). For Hill, the intention was to "discover something that could be called the *art* of Negro acting." (Abramson 94) The company performed to the local Harlem community which in turn supported the dramatic endeavours of the company by attending performances on a regular basis. Hay quotes historian Ethel Pitts Walker who maintains that the company "played to over fifty thousand patrons, who saw 324 performances over nine years." (173) It was not, however, simply a community theatre company. On August 30 1944, the company staged a performance of Anna Lucasta a comedy written by Philip Yordan. Woll notes that originally, Yordan wrote a drama of " a Polish-American family's adventures in a small Pennsylvanian town. (9) Despite the fact that it was reasonably well received Broadway producers refused to "option" the play. (Woll 9) On Hill's recommendation, the play was re-written to tell the tale of an African-American family. It was staged in the company's venue in Harlem, where it received excellent reviews and subsequently transferred to Broadway. "It moved to Broadway with a new emphasis on comedy and became one of the seasons biggest hits." (Woll 9) The New York Times critic Lewis Nichols writing on September 10 1944 wrote: "reviewers, screen representatives ... acting agents [and] an audience with a chip all but falling from it shoulder" were present on the first night (vol. 5). Nichols was exceptionally complimentary to the acting, the direction and to the intentions of the company and performance as a whole. While acknowledging that "[t]he play still is not the perfectly written drama of the centuries", he contends that

> [a]s an exercise in the talents of the theatre ... it is of considerable moment in this autumn season of 1944.... Having been playing together before, the members of the American Negro Theatre act as a unit rather than one or two stars - and the rest of the cast.... There is another important credit to 'Anna Lucasta' quite aside from the fact that it is good theatre. The group ... have proven completely that Harlem also likes a play about people rather than about a race of people....

In referring to "Negro Actors", the critic makes important observations about the history of the African-American actor and the way in which the American Negro Theatre company sought to re-write, or *re-play* the role of the African-American in theatre. He argues that

> [i]n the usual Broadway scheme of things, the Negro normally is one of a few types. He is a zoot-suited, gin drinking son of the Savoy, whose mother sings only haunting spirituals, whose father is called 'George', on the pullman cars; he is a butler or maid; or, at another extreme, he is dangerous with reefers and a knife. On Broadway, the Negro often is a symbol rather than a character, and typifies evil, or low comedy or the spirit of jazz. Sometimes he is used to cry down the undoubted and horrible wrongs that have been his lot, but even there he also is more symbolical than real. In 'Anna Lucasta', by the grace of the intelligent direction of his own theatre, he is playing a human role ... After Mr. Robeson's Othello, and the new visitor from Harlem, Negro actors will not be required to wear zoot suits this year.(vol. 5)

Broadway, it seems, was finally ready to accept the African-American actor in something other than the staple of racially stereotypic roles. Woll notes that the Billboard's critic also "praised the entire cast of actors."(9)

The American Negro Theatre company was following in the tradition of previous African-American stock or travelling theatre companies, such as the Lafayette Players, DuBois' Krigwa Players, the Howard Players, the Rose McClendon Players (I have made reference to these companies in Chapter Two.)

In Their Place on Stage (1988). Brown-Guillory maintains that playwright and actress Alice Childress was a founding member of the American Negro Theatre and continued to perform with them until the company folded.[12] Described by Woll as "[e]ssentially a self-educated woman without academic degrees" (196), Childress worked as an actress and a playwright, over a period of forty years. With the American Negro Theatre company Childress worked mainly as an actress (the major black playwrights for the company were Abram Hill, Theodore Brown and Owen Dodson), however, she also found time to write plays and engage in political activity for the theatre. Brown-Guillory (1990) notes that even when American theatre "looked upon her with blind eyes and turned to her with deaf ears" (98), she herself remained faithful to the actor and became instrumental in the early 1950s in "initiating advanced, guaranteed pay for union off-Broadway contracts in New York City" (98), thereby forcing the recognition of the Actors Equity Association and the Harlem Stage Hand Local Union. She was able to benefit directly from her political efforts when in 1952, one of her earliest works, Gold Through The Trees became the first play to be professionally produced by a black woman; that is to say, the play was "performed by unionized actors." (Brown-Guillory, Wines In The Wilderness 99).

Prior to her first professionally staged play, she wrote two other plays primarily because "racial prejudice was such that I was considered 'too light' to play my real self and they would not cast light-skinned blacks in white roles.... I decided I'd rather create from the start, create good roles I'd like to play by writing them" (Chinoy and Jenkins 347). In 1949, she wrote Florence . It was performed in the same year by the American Negro Theatre in New York and published a year later. In 1950, Childress adapted Langston Hughes' popular novel Simple Speaks His Mind into a one-play. It was performed at the Club Baron Theatre in New York, 1950. But it was her 1955 play Trouble in Mind that earned Childress an Obie award "for the best original off-

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12 Childress was in the production of Anna Lucasta. She played Blanche the prostitute. Nichols makes special mention of her performance in his review dated September 10 1944: "Alice Childress is drawing what must be the final picture of a glib, sardonic streetwalker." (The New York Times vol. 5)

Broadway play of the 1955-56 season" (MacNicholas 7: 119).[13] Trouble in Mind premiered at the Greenwich Mews Theatre, New York on November 3 1955. The Greenwich Mews Theatre was a community project sponsored by the Village Presbyterian Church and Brotherhood Synagogue. The play was jointly directed by Childress and actress Clarice Taylor.[14] Trouble in Mind was Childress' first full-length drama and ran for ninety-one performances[15]. After Trouble in Mind, Childress did not write another play until 1966, when Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White premiered at the University of Michigan in December 1966. For the latter play she was made an "honorary citizen of Atlanta" (MacNicholas 7: 118)[16]

Childress was not, despite being one of the few black women playwrights of the 1940s, writing in a vacuum as a black woman. Brown-Guillory argues that as a black female playwright, Childress along with Ntozake Shange (who was writing for theatre in the 1970s) and Lorraine Hansberry (who was writing for theatre in the sixties) "have profited from the theatrical breakthroughs made by the women playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance, many of whom continued to write during the 1930s and 1940s." (Their Place On Stage 25) Shirley Graham was one such playwright. Perhaps the major difference between the two generations of playwrights is the content of their dramatic works and the fact that the latter generation of playwrights have tended to narrow the focus of their dramatic practice. Thus although Childress wrote four novels, she tended to concentrate on writing and adapting for the stage.[17] By contrast, Graham, who "lived

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13 Obie Awards were established in 1956 by The Village Voice for the best off-Broadway productions.

14 Clarice Taylor was one of the earlier members of the American Negro Theatre Company. She performed for on Broadway between 1942 and 1975. She joined the Negro Ensemble Company in the 1960s. For more details of her performance credits see Woll, Dictionary of the Black Theatre 250-251.

15 There were two versions of Trouble in Mind, a two-act Broadway version and three-act published version.

16 I am not concerned here to offer detailed critical analyses of all the plays by Alice Childress. The intention is merely to highlight the work of another black female playwright of the period. To detail all the plays by Childress which spans some four decades would necessitate a different dissertation. There are however numerous works which examine in more detail Childress' contribution to theatre as a playwright. See by way of example: Their Place on Stage 25-135; Doris Abramson, Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre; "Alice Childress' Dramatic Structure", in Black Women Writers (ed.) Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Press, 1984). future page references to this text will follow the citation; Janet Brown, Feminist Drama (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1979) 56-70; Loften Mitchell, Black Drama: The Story of the American Negro in the Theatre 122-127, 145-147, 215-217; John MacNicholas, Dictionary of Literary Biography vol 7: Twentieth-Century American Dramatists Part 1 A-J (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1981) 118-123; Dictionary of Literary Biography vol 38: Afro-American Writers After 1955: Dramatists and Prose Writers (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1985) 66-80; Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (eds.) Women in American Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, 1981)346-347; Gloria Hull et al. (eds.) All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982) 284-285, 290-291,345-346. Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

17 Her four novels include: Like One of the Family, Conversations from a Domestic's Life (New York: Independence Publishers, 1956), A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich (New York. Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1973); A Short Walk (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1979) and Rainbow Jordan (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan 1979). A

a truly extraordinary life", was renowned as "[p]laywright, composer, musician, teacher, director, biographer, novelist, administrator and international civil rights activist" (Barlow 237).[18]

Despite the link between the generations of playwrights, there are clear ways in which their treatment of the race theme differs. Consequently, by the 1940s, actors and playwrights in general were much more forthright in their determination to oust racist stereotypes; in short, one begins to observe a stronger political or dialectical strand to the plays, as well as "sophisticated" formal devices[19]. This point is substantiated by

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Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich was adapted into a screen play in 1977. Of Childress' plays, Trouble in Mind was produced by the BBC in London, 1964. According to Brown-Guillory, Childress refused to adapt Trouble in Mind for Broadway, "because the producer wanted her to make radical script changes. Alice Childress says of her rejection of the Broadway offer, "'[m]ost of our problems have not seen the light of day in our works, and much has been pruned from our manuscripts before the public has been allowed a glimpse of a finished work. It is ironical that those who oppose us are in a position to dictate the quality of our contributions.'" (Their Place On Stage 31)

18 In Their Place on Stage, Brown-Guillory lists Childress as an "actress, playwright, novelist, essayist, columnist, lecturer and theater consultant." (30) I would argue however that Childress' activities though equally as extraordinary as those of Grahams', tend to centre around theatre. Thus as an essayist/columnist, her publications included: "For a Negro Theatre", in Masses and Mainstream, 1951 "A Woman Playwright Speaks her Mind", in Anthology of the Afro-American in Theatre: A Critical Approach, 1988 "Tributes - to Paul Robeson" in Freedomways, 1971. As Brown-Guillory acknowledges, she is the author of essays on "black art and theater history" (Their Place On Stage 30).

19 It is also interesting to note that in the 1940s, Broadway began to stage many more plays on African-American themes. Abramson acknowledges the fact that "[t]here were the inevitable musicals" (95). In all, there were some twenty-four African-American Broadway and/or off-Broadway shows that dealt with African-American themes, between 1940 and 1950. I offer a brief sample: Native Son , a popular novel by African-American novelist Richard Wright. Wright adapted his novel Native Son for the stage with playwright Paul Green who won the Pulitzer prize for his "Negro Play" In Abraham's Bosom (1926) cited in chapter two of the thesis. The play was produced and directed by Orson Welles. The production which opened on Broadway on March 24, 1941, ran for 114 performances. It returned in 1942 for a further 84 performances at the Majestic Theatre. On October 23 1942, Brooks Anderson, The New York Times described Native Son as "virtuoso theatre ... a social document written with bitterness and passion.... Acting inside a richly imaginative production [the company] convey the dark fury of a social tragedy that is translated into incandescence by ... superlative acting." (The New York Times vol. 5); Carmen Jones a musical comedy by Oscar Hammerstein, produced at the Broadway Theatre December 2 1943. This version of Carmen Jones was adapted from Bizet's operatic version into a Broadway "all-black musical of contemporary life. Don Jose became Joe, an army corporal, the toreador Escamillo. a prize fighter, and Carmen, a worker in a parachute factory during World War II. Nevertheless the basic context of *Carmen* remained intact" The New York Times critic, Lewis Nichols, wrote on December 3 1943: "even aside from the words and music 'Carmen Jones is quite a show" (vol. 5). Anna Lucasta, cited earlier, opened on August 30 1944; On Striver's Row written by Abram Hill,. was first produced by the Rose McClendon players in Harlem, 1939. The American Negro Company performed it in 1940 and a musical version was staged at The Appollo in 1941. On February 28 1946, the American Negro Theatre Company gave twenty-seven further performances. According to Woll, "the revised play dropped its songs in 1946."(118) Woll notes that no African-American plays reached Broadway in the 1942-1943 season and during the 1946-1947 season. On September 27 1947 Our Lan written by black playwright Theodore Ward opened at the Royale Theatre. It ran for forty performances. It was first performed off-Broadway at the Grand Street Theatre in April 1946. Of the Broadway performance, In his review of September 29 1947, Atkinson felt that "'Our Lan' ha[d] acquired theatrical dimensions and lost simplicity.... On the large stage of the Royale ... the theatrical weakness of the script assume[d] an importance it did not have in the tiny downtown

Brown-Guillory who argues that in the 50s (and one could argue for the ways in which this was already beginning in the 1940s when collectives such as the American Negro Theatre began to form)

> black women playwrights, like their male counterparts, made considerable efforts to create new images of blacks and to counteract stereotypes that had been presented in earlier decades by white dramatist and by some black playwrights who had conformed to standards that were acceptable on the American stage. Before 1950, with the exception of Harlem Renaissance efforts, black male and female playwrights had a difficult time securing professional productions because there was not a great demand for plays about black life, and the plays about black life that were being produced were authored by well-known white dramatists.(Their Place On Stage 26)

One could argue for the ways in which the plays by Graham and Childress in the 1940 to the 1950s develop the formal and thematic devices of the plays by black women of the twenties, while at the same time seeking to usher in a more radical and direct form of black politics; one that does not compromise the African-American's right to equality. In other words a new type of black protest play was being written by black women playwrights on the black experience. Mance Williams, in Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s though commenting largely on the sixties and seventies argues that the fifties saw the beginning of a new protest play, "one that not only exhorted Black people to stand up for their rights but warned Whites that Black would settle for nothing less than their full share of the American Dream"[20]

Childress' Florence, her one-act play performed by the American Negro Theatre company in the forties, is an example of the new form of protest play. Here a mother (Mama) awaits a train to Harlem, where her daughter Florence lives. In the segregated waiting room where the play is set, Mama meets "Mrs Carter, a white liberal ... irrepressibly racist." (Their Place On Stage 31) As Mama discusses the difficulty that her daughter Florence is encountering finding acting roles, Mrs Carter assures her that her daughter may as well give up, since she herself, a white woman, is encountering the same problem. The direct protest that Mama (and by implication Childress) enacts when Mrs Carter suggests she might be able to help Florence by getting her a job as a maid, is to send her daughter the little money she has, in order that she might keep on trying to find work as an actress.

Shirley Graham's It's Morning also written in the forties is a strongly voiced protest against slavery. Despite the fact that it is set in the mid-nineteenth century, it is possible to see the ways in which the playwright has begun to adopt the cultural-

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playhouse" (The New York Times vol. 5). Our Lan along with Richard Wright's Native Son were the "[o]nly two plays by Negro playwrights [to be] produced on Broadway during this decade" (Abramson 95).

20 Mance Williams, Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985) 112.

political voice of the time. Thus Graham seeks, in this drama of infanticide, to offer a direct challenge to white supremacy. Arguably, the thematic concerns are indicative of the strong urge towards voicing the African-American and, in this instance, female voice, without acquiescing to "presumptuous whites" (Their Place On Stage 31).

"The theme of rejecting stereotypes and of not compromising one's integrity is further explored by Childress in Trouble in Mind ... Childress insists in this drama that blacks must maintain their integrity and identity in the theater, refusing to accept roles that characterize them as exotic or half-human creatures, regardless of the monetary losses." (Their Place On Stage 31) According to The New York Times critic (November 5 1955), Trouble in Mind is a

> fresh, lively satire ... Miss Childress who was a member of the original company of 'Anna Lucasta' has some witty and penetrating things to say about the dearth of roles for Negro actors in contemporary theatre, the cut-throat competition for these parts and the fact that Negro actors often find themselves playing stereotyped roles in which they cannot bring themselves to believe. She also has some sharp comments to make about the jumpy state of nerves in the much-investigated entertainment media ... Miss Childress' cast does as handsomely by her as any off-Broadway group in many a season ... Clarice Taylor, playing a resigned veteran of numerous maid's roles, gives a beautiful performance as a woman who finds she must speak her mind at last. Hilda Haynes, playing an actress who is an old hand at conventional Negro roles, is smoothly cynical (The New York Times vol. 6)

Trouble in Mind is a self-reflexive, satirical examination by the actress Childress (working as playwright) to explore the ways in which black actors must constantly struggle against the racist presumptions of white playwrights, directors, actors, and producers. The crux of the play centres around the play-within-the play Chaos in Belleville, which poses a "contemporary and realistic treatment of racial conflict" (MacNicholas 7: 119). With regard to the issue of the cultural politics of the time, Childress offers a protest play that does battle with racist/sexist institutions (in this instance the theatre) directly and uncompromisingly. In the Broadway version of Trouble in Mind, the protagonist Willetta Mayer, leads a cast walk-out, so that the white director, Al Manners "undergoes [a] ... change of heart, calls Willetta back, and agrees to call the playwright in for a script revision" (MacNicholas 7: 120). MacNicholas notes that "in the published version in two acts, the play concludes without the fanfare finale. Since Manners does not reappear, the cast is left wondering whether the plays is folding and whether they are again out of work. Although Willetta is convinced that she will be fired from the show, she is determined not to go down without a fight and to assert the truth bravely." (120). Brown-Guillory (1988) argues that Childress' "concern is the invalidation of blacks as persons." (61) This concern, which is addressed by the black women playwrights of the twenties is reinforced by the dramatic work of Childress and Graham some twenty years later.

The focus in the remainder of the chapter is on the dramatic text of Shirley Graham, who remained a "tributary" theatre writer. Unlike Childress and the American Negro Theatre company, Graham did not write for the professional theatre. This section has merely served to situate the work of Graham around the works of another black female playwright and other African-American theatre activities of the time. By the same token, it must be remembered that Childress has spanned almost half a century of American Theatre History. It is almost impossible to discuss her work and contributions to theatre as though she and her work were a product only of the 1940s. Graham on the other hand, who is was more inclined towards the academic and practical study of politics and cultural anthropology was not part of the general or specific Broadway and off-Broadway culture. The political relevance of her play, It's Morning, for notions of black female subjectivity are discussed in the following section.

I "Gross Pollution": Infanticide As A Form Of Revolt[21]

In addressing "ourselves" as potential radical subjects, bell hooks (1992) observes that while fictional black female characters in the novels by black women writers are frequently to be admired for their acts of "resistance to the status quo"(49), those same black women do not emerge as radical, even though they make the leap from being objects to subjects. She argues that, too often, "they simply conform to existing norms, even ones they once resisted" (hooks, Black Looks 49). Paying particular attention to the African-American protagonists of Walker's and Morrison's novels, she highlights the ways in which Celie in The Color Purple for example, is "reinscribed within the context of family and domestic relations by the novel's end" (47). While Sula in Morrison's novel of the same title "like so many other black female characters in contemporary fiction has no conscious politics, [and] never links her struggle to be self-defining with the collective plight of black women" (48). If one views the "collective plight of black women" as having been established around the middle of the 1960s, then perhaps hooks has a case in point. However, in It's Morning and Beloved, Morrison and Graham, whose work is set in nineteenth century Southern America, seek deliberately to align their protagonists with those women who during slavery enacted radical forms of resistance to white hegemonic rule by recourse to infanticide.[22]

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21 Quoted in Medea and Other Plays by Euripides (London: Penguin Classics, 1986) (58). Future page references to the play text will follow the citation.

22 See Herbert Aptheker American Negro Slave Revolts, (New York: International Publishers, 1970) (3).

One of the earliest fictional accounts of infanticide in the classical Western literary tradition was written by Euripides in 431BC. The eponymous female protagonist, Medea, decides to murder her children by way of punishing her husband for abandoning her and deciding to marry a younger, wealthier, woman Princess Glauce, the daughter of King Creon. For the original Athenian audience, the terror of Medea lay in the fact that she was able to murder her own innocent children in a cruel act of revenge. In a final meeting with Medea at the close of the tragedy, Jason, her former husband perceives her not as the mother of his children, but as a "tiger, a Tuscan scylla - but more savage"(158).

Slave women in the Southern states of America were not in the *enviable* position of being able to decide the fate of their kith and kin, which included unborn children. Children could be sold as soon as they were old enough to work, either in the master's house or in the fields.[23] It was not unusual for children under the age of twelve years also to be sold as slave companions to the master's children. Either way, in most instances, it was standard practice for mothers to be separated from their children.

It's Morning (1940) is a short two-act play which deals with the trauma faced by a slave woman Cissie, who is forced to give up her daughter and son to the master of the plantation, known to the women as "massa Charles". It is the last day of the civil war, Graham informs in the opening stage directions; December 31, 1862, and her daughter Millie must be handed to the slave owner on the first day of January 1863.[24] In order to spare her daughter from a life of brutality at the hands of the white master, she decides to murder her daughter at dawn. The murder of Millie takes place in a hidden area, at the same time as the troops arrive to proclaim Abraham Lincoln's declaration that all slaves are free.

Formally, It's Morning is similar to a classical Greek tragedy. A Chorus of three slave women, relates off-stage and past events to the audience, as well as offering a continuous commentary on the events as they unfold. The murder of Cissie, in keeping with Greek tragedy takes place off stage in deference to the aesthetic sensibility of the spectator. There is also, in It's Morning, common to, but not in keeping with, all Greek tragedies, a "seer", or prophet, in the manner of Tiresias in Oedipus The King.[25]

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23 See Jacobs' autobiography 15-16. This fact is also verified by the editor in the introduction (xv). See also William Goodell, The American Slave Code. According to Goodell, it was standard procedure "for slaves, as Property [to be] transmitted by Inheritance, or by Will, to heirs-at-law or Legatees. In the distribution of the Estates they are distributed like other Property." (55).

24 Jacobs describes the slave's New Year's day as follows: "to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies." (16)

25 Sophocles, The Theban Plays (tran.) E F Watling (Middlesex: Penguin, 1947).

Although not blind, Graham describes Grannie Lou as "the oldest slave on the plantation, considered a little crazy". In this instance, "crazy" might relate to the fact that she possesses abnormal or mystical powers.

When the play opens, the Chorus of women in It's Morning are already offering prayers and religious song to Jesus in the vain hope that he might avert the inevitable. Aunt Sue, the eldest of the Chorus and the leader, informs that

> Ole missie (Cissie) wouldn't touch a bite o' food/She cry all day an' wish fuh massa Charles/Dat man give huh no peace he say he will hab Millie gal,/Else tu'n us out to starve-/an' missie too. (214)

This classical form of exposition, which reveals the dilemma already established previous to the curtain rising, is very similar to the Corinthian Chorus in Medea who report "that unhappy woman from Colchis/Still crying, not yet calm ... /And my own heart suffers to/When Jason's house is suffering".(21)

Both Choruses are, to varying degrees, in the precarious position of being in sympathy with the female protagonist, while having to rely on and/or owe a dubious loyalty to the masters: "massa" Charles and Jason respectively. The two texts display formal and thematic similarities, leaving no doubt that Graham deliberately works within the tragic Greek classical form to develop her themes.[26] Thematically however, It's Morning is in some ways more comparable to the fictive re-writing of a similar event in Toni Morrison's Beloved.

In Beloved, a young mother who escapes from her master's farm, murders her young child and attempts to murder the other three that they might be saved from living as slaves. The baby ghost returns to haunt the house and many years later re-appears as a fully grown woman. The title Beloved was the name given to the sacrificed child. The source for Morrison's Beloved is an event that occurred in 1851 and points to the ways that Morrison revises or fictionalises a black African-American historical event for a contemporary reader.

Margaret Garner, an escaped fugitive slave murdered her child, and attempted to murder the other three when she was confronted with the threat of being returned to slavery. Angela Davis, in her commentary on black female insurgents during slavery writes that "women resisted and advocated challenges to slavery at every turn". Quoting from Aptheker's "The Negro Woman" (1948), she draws attention to

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26 An observation made by Perkins in the introduction to Black Female Playwrights 14.

> Margaret Garner, fugitive slave who when trapped near Cincinnati, killed her own daughter and tried to kill herself. She rejoiced that the girl was dead - "now she would never know what a woman suffers as a slave ... I will go singing to the gallows rather than be returned to slavery."(Davis 21)[27]

It's Morning also has a source. It is more than probable that Graham was familiar with Margaret Garner's story but integral to Graham's drama is a mythical folkloric source. The folk story is told by Grannie Lou, a first generation slave and the only woman who has retained a memory of Africa. As the Chorus of women struggle to find ways of appeasing the master, Charles, in order to save Millie from the auction block, Grannie Lou intercedes with the story of a folk heroine. The women are at first cynical and not a little fearful of her because she represents a voodoo priestess.[28] Thus while they are usually indifferent to her, on this occasion they turn to her, hoping that she can "bile up sompin' dat kin help"(216). While she does not resort to creating a potion in the way that they imagine, she does relate a story which enchants all the women, especially Cissie. Her story then becomes a catalyst for Cissie's sacrificial act of murder at the end of the play. Grannie Lou captures their imagination with her recollection of the tale of a female African ancestor who, on hearing how her three sons are to be sold into slavery, beheads them. Graham re-crafts Garner's tragedy into a folk tradition that has its origins in Africa. This also points to the fact and reminds the reader/spectator that resistance to colonisation started when slave ships threatened the West Coast of Africa, and not merely when slaves were already incarcerated in a system of domination and degradation.

What captures the women's imagination as Grannie Lou becomes "lost in the happy memories of her youth" (218) is the precise detail that she gives of the ancestor's physique. Grannie Lou's folk heroine, the ancestor, is wrought with almost legendary

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27 See Mae G Henderson, "The Body As Historical Text", in Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, Nationality In Modern Text (ed.) Hortense Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991) 62-87. In this psycho-historical essay on Morrison's Beloved, the author quotes from an interview with Morrison who discusses the source for her novel as being the incident involving Margaret Garner; see also Gina Wisker, "Disremembered and Unaccounted For", in Black Women Writers, Wisker cites Garner as a "cause célèbre". According to Wisker the event took place in 1855 (84); see also Eugene Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll: The World The Slaves Made. Genovese notes that infanticide did occur on plantations but only in exceptional circumstances. He records an incident in 1822 of a slave condemned to death for infanticide. Genovese describes the father of the child as "a respectable, married white man". Given the circumstances that often led to black female slaves bearing the children of white men, I cannot help but question Genovese's notion of "respectability" in this instance (497); see also Herbert Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts Aptheker however cites infanticide as an individual form of protest that occurred amongst slaves (3).

28 Christian would describe her as the conjure woman. Although the image of the conjure woman is partly a stereotype constructed during the early nineteenth-century, she maintains that it also contains some elements of truth within it: "in this case ... black people ... kept alive certain aspects of various African religions such as herbal medicines, folk wisdom and ritual", (Black Women Novelists 18).

and mythical characteristics. It is a wholly attractive and positive rendering of African women in Africa. Her physical strength and prowess create a figure of total independence, unfettered by the chains of slavery, patriarchy and its attendant institution of domesticity.[29] "Dat war a 'oman", Grannie Lou tells the Chorus of slave women (216), "Swift as a lion an' strong as any ox/ Da sugah cane went down fo' huh knife,/Lak cottonstalks ... /No man could walk wid her ... An' sing!/She uster sing out in da fields" (216).

Of course, there is always the danger of distorting the animal imagery that defines the ancestor so that she becomes bestial, but Graham is careful only to describe her actions and abilities in terms of the prowess and agility of the African animal, not her actual body. Thus the ancestor's swiftness exceeds the swiftness of a male counterpart, just as her strength ensures that she exceeds the men to the point that she is not dependent on them. Effectively she comes to embody and demonstrate culturally defined masculine traits alongside her obviously female attributes, signifying or hinting at the matrifocal nature of pre-slavery Africa which had little if any recourse to patriarchal domination.[30]

Her three sons, "blak an tall lak she" (216), help to create in her an alternative image of motherhood, one not in keeping with any of the Western patriarchal constructions of either black or white motherhood. It was the dominant ideology that confined white women to a position which early female emancipationists would come to describe as domestic slavery, and the same ideology that created the stereotype of the black mammy, who, according to Christian, was depicted as having "enormous breasts full enough to nourish all the children of the world"(11). In contrast, the ancestor is seen to suffer no such bondage, and demonstrates her uncompromising and challenging nature when she beheads her three sons who are threatened with slavery. Grannie Lou explains:

> An' one day news comes dat dey sole her/sons down ribbah/ ... She say dey nebbah go. De white folks laf,/but niggahs dassent laf - dey see huh face/She don' say no'tin' mo', ... /An' early in da mawnin' call huh boys,/An' when dey come, she tell 'em to stan' close/An' watch da sun

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29 Insofar as the institution of patriarchy might also be perceived as a system of domination and control, it is possible to establish parallels between the system of slavery for nineteenth century black women and the domestic sphere for nineteenth-century middle-class white women. However, as Davis and hooks point out, this is a problematic assertion to make, because drawing unquestionable lines between slavery as experienced by black women and the type of patriarchal oppression tolerated by white women during the same period is a privilege reserved for white women. Furthermore, it does not address the fact that white women also colluded with white men in oppressing black slaves. hooks refutes the notion that the oppression suffered by white women is in anyway similar to the oppression suffered by black female slaves. (Ain't I A Woman 141-158)

30 For a fictional explication of matriarchal tribes in Africa see Alice Walker, The Temple of My Familiar (London: Women's Press, 1989) in which Walker fictionalises a utopian matrilinear tribe.

> come up out ob da hills ... /An' den dat 'omam lift huh big cane knife/She cry out in a wild, strange voice,/An' wid one sweep she cut off all dey heads (217).

The Chorus and Cissie are shocked and spellbound by Grannie Lou's story, and thereafter, the image of the ancestor silently dominates the drama as Cissie decides to murder Millie.

From Grannie Lou's story, Graham traces a deliberate matrilinear line. Cissie, who remains visible in the background while Grannie Lou recounts the story, takes on the role of the ancestor, or becomes the ancestor in the moment that she overhears the tale and finally decides that as the sun rises, she too will behead her child. She is also depicted by Graham as possessing physical characteristics not dissimilar to those of the ancestor. This is related by the Chorus who make comparisons between Cissie and her immediate female descendant, Millie. Just as Grannie Lou exclaims at the ancestor's ability to sing, so too does Aunt Sue comment on the way that Millie sings in a manner very similar to her mother when she was younger. This comes as a surprise to the Chorus, who cannot imagine a Cissie unbroken by slavery. Like the ancestor, Cissie is described as being "black as a berry an' lovely as da night" (215). She too possesses the swiftness and independence that is normally attributed to creatures untamed by domestication. And whereas the ancestor was comparable with the fittest animal survivors in Africa so the young Cissie was "slender and swift as a young colt - /light on her feet,/she would jes prance an' run about da place" (215)

By the end of the play, she too will possess the indeterminate will of the ancestor; by murdering her child in order to save her from being sold away from her, she confirms her place in the female struggle against slavery. In Cissie's case however, it is not only the imminent sale of Millie that causes her to seek solace in murder. If it was merely the *sale* of Millie then she would presumably have murdered her son too, she knows, however, that her son Peter is "small and weak/ ... He's wo'thless in da fields" (223). What makes all the women anguish over Millie is their sure knowledge that once sold, she will be subject like all slave women to being raped. It is Millie's body that master Charles wants, in the same way that he wanted Cissie's body.

Although rape is not named as such in the dramatic text, the inferences by Cissie and the Chorus are obvious. As the women discuss his lewd and lascivious countenance, they also compare the overseer to a rabid dog, the only difference being that rabid dogs become atavistic at the sight of water. Conversely, the master's atavism comes about at the sight of young black slave girls.

> Phoebe — He's lak a beast dats scented fresh,/young meat,/He's old - He'll suck her blood lak damp/swamp ting. (*She shudders*)

Aunt Sue — His jowls hang down lak empty tatah sacks An' `bacca juice falls drippin'/f'om his mouth/Leavin' a trail o' slime whar he has passed.

Cissie — Ah seed him lick his lips an' smile an' grin,/Ole missie beg him wait 'til cotton bust ... ,/He say he wait no mo' ... He want da gal./Ah seed his hands ... dey touch her golden breast/She war so scared, she couldn't run ... /An' den she scream ... /Ah heard him laf ... /and' spit upon da floah! (123)

The same scene was witnessed by Aunt Sue when Cissie was "a young colt". Again repeated references to the overseer's atavistic nature are made, so that always the images of slender, swift and proud looking animals (which are qualities of the ancestor that Cissie and Millie also embody) are juxtaposed with the dramatically sullied images of the master. In old age, the master is described in terms of his most repulsive, characteristics, in younger years his drooping and salivating countenance is much keener. Thus Aunt Sue comments on how she has witnessed "da buckra eyin' heh'", his determination to "break huh will", his easy and sadistic wielding of power as Cissie fell crying to his feet:

Aunt Sue — ... he laf, an 'kick huh wid his foot, not hard, but lak you'd kick/a bitch dat's large wid puppy, out of you path (214).

What is being fought over, then, is not only the sale of Millie, as a full hand, but her body and the (ab)use the buyer or the master will make of that body. Cissie denies master Charles, or the next owner of Millie, the right to rape her daughter, by transgressing the slave law that denied slave any rights of property or relations, the command that declared murder a criminal act, and the written statute that held: "an infant cannot be emancipated" (Goodell 326).[31]

Millie's child-like innocence and ignorance of her fate result in a veil of silence being drawn around her impending future. Too young to understand the predicament of being a young slave girl, she remains oblivious to everything except "the strained expressions on the faces of the women" (217). The veil serves to keep from Millie one of the inevitable realities of black slave girlhood, namely rape. and enables the women to avoid naming or articulating this inevitability.[32]

By the time she makes her first entrance (previous to this entrance, only her voice has been heard singing, offstage) there is an equally oppressive fear over which to

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31 In Goodell's documentation of slave codes, he cites the ruling which held that slaves, "Being Property themselves ... can own no Property" (74); see also 74-119.

32 Henderson refers to the veil that Morrison employs as a metaphor which "measures a division within the race - a psychic and expressive boundary separating the *speakable* from the *unspeakable* and unspoken" (63).

draw a veil. Grannie Lou has just finished telling her story of the ancestor captivating the unseen Cissie in the shadows. It is the only point in the play when Millie, Cissie and Grannie Lou are seen and/or heard at the same moment. It creates a pictorial and aural crux in which the three generations of women are held dramatically in a moment saturated with the image of Grannie Lou's final lines: "An wid one sweep she cut off dey heads/Dey all roll down at her feet - All tree of dem/.(*It is Grannie's moment of triumph. She holds it ... Outside a girl's voice comes/nearer ... Cissie remains standing as if spellbound.*)" (217)

The stage directions would seem to indicate that Cissie has decided to sacrifice Millie, so that by the end of the scene, Rose, another Chorus woman articulates, the realisation that must be dawning on the spectator:

Rose	(*Suddenly fear clutching at her throat and thickening her voice*) What yo'/ sayin' Cissie?/What yo' all sayin'?/(*Cissie whirls in the doorway like a wounded animal at bay. Her eyes are blazing. She speaks wildly*)
Cissie	Dey ain't gwine, you hyear me? DEY ... ain't gwine ... NEDDAH ... !(*She rushes out the door*) (219)

Scene two opens at the hour before Cissie intends to murder her daughter. Graham appropriately litters the scene with symbolic references which point to the imminence of Millie's death at her mother's hands. It is New Year's Day and in keeping with Cissie's wishes, the children and the women have celebrated the New Year with a party, but as they fall asleep at the end of the party, "deep shadows" occupy the room and the thoughts of the women who watch Cissie's "graven image" as it occasionally "touches the blade of the huge cane knife". They are "huddled together near the fire", which is now reduced to a "few glowing cones". As if to further compound the image of anticipated mourning (whether it is because Millie is to be sold or because Cissie is going to murder her) and helplessness "Cripple Jake" occupies a corner in the room, holding an inert "banjo on his lap". The women's hushed whispers offer the only sound in the room and the "darkness and chill" which saturate the atmosphere complete the sense of impending doom (219).

It would be inaccurate to assume as the Chorus women do that, in re-telling her story, Grannie has bewitched Cissie into murdering her daughter (220). It is true that Graham's stage directions point to the fact that Cissie is spellbound on hearing the story but, arguably, this is as a result of realising what choices are available to her within the rigid confines of the institution of slavery. Consequently, the women's anger at Grannie Lou is more to do with the fact that they are powerless as a community to avoid or divert Cissie's attention away from infanticide. Well versed in the realities and ground

rules of slavery, they only perceive the impending sacrifice as murder and not as a form of rebellion and a need to own the body of her child - to own it and be responsible for it in a way that the ideology of white motherhood demands. The issue here is that of the black female body, and who owns it. A statutory condition of slavery was that all slaves belonged to the master to do as he pleased with.[33] In taking Millie's life/body, Cissie commits a crime against slavery before she commits a crime against a Christian God, for she works from the assumption in the first instance that Millie should belong to her.

Graham weaves a heavily ironic ending into the drama. At the appointed hour of Millie's death, an hour before the sun rises, it is the national troops and not the master or overseer who arrive. Surprised, a woman *"cracks the shutter and peeps out"* (222). The sight of soldiers would have indeed been unusual, not only because it was the first day of the New Year, but because a civil war was being waged between the Northern and Southern States. Their arrival creates consternation among the women and men; and Cissie, believing "*the time has come*", disappears into the inner room with her cane knife. Had she stayed, she would have heard the exalted declaration of the soldier, proclaiming to the slaves: "Free to greet this Dawn! You're free!" (222). As if they had long forgotten the notion of freedom, he asks: "Do you understand? No longer slaves!"(222). The tragic moment is completed when the *real* ending of the play occurs a short while later and Cissie enters carrying "the lifeless body of Millie, her head fallen back" (223). Just as Grannie Lou describes the way in which "the niggahs dassent laf", when they watched the face of the ancestor, on being told that her sons are to be sold, Graham in the stage directions offers a corresponding though more detailed image of Cissie's face which is "ebony", just as the ancestor's was "black", and "deeply chiselled". In this instance, it is Cissie's "unseeing eyes" that are "set". At the beginning of the play, Grannie Lou suggests that "dey [the children] don' hab tuh go, Ah tells yo'?" This point is reiterated when she sees Millie in Cissie's arms: "Ah tole you ... She don' hab tuh go!" (224)

In It's Morning, Graham appears to deliberately create a set of corresponding images and actions between Cissie and the ancestor as if to reinforce what hooks found to be lacking in the works of contemporary black women novelists; namely, she links the struggle of the black female slave during slavery to the plight of the ancestor in Africa in order to articulate and concretise the common experiences (what hooks terms the "collective plight") of black women during slavery. Once Cissie has overheard the story, she takes on the role of the ancestor and exercises to the full what limited choices she has within the very specific and oppressive confines of slavery. Just as the ancestor cried out "sompin', in a wild strange voice" (217), from Cissie's throat also comes "a cry

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33 See Goodell, The American Slave Code "The Power of the Master or Owner is virtually unlimited, the submission required of the Slave is unbounded; the Slave, being Property, can have no protection against the Master, and has no redress for injuries inflicted by him (viii).

of anguish as she falls to her knees" (224). The cry of anguish from Cissie and the ancestor, which could be interpreted as a sudden realisation of their actions, might also be viewed as a cry against slavery, and what it has reduced her to, in view of the only choices she was able to make. However it might also be construed as an ambiguous cry, one that acknowledges victory and defeat at the same moment. Cissie cries because at the moment that freedom is declared, she legally owns her daughter's body anyway. The tragic irony of the situation is that although she has revolted against the master by murdering Millie, once freedom is declared, she has lost a child rather than saved her. In short, deliverance from slavery, by death, becomes a tragic loss of life with the abolition of slavery.

When Cissie presents the body of her daughter with its head hanging down to the group, only the Yankee soldier "stands as if paralysed". The chorus of women and the two men, "crouch back" (223). Although it is not the soldier *per se*, over whom Cissie claims a victory, he nevertheless is a part of the community that sanctioned the routine oppression of African-Americans.[34] He literally loses his power to speak. When, as the stage directions dictate, he eventually "*finds his voice*", it is to stutter unformed questions. "My God! My God!! What? What? ... " (223)

It is interesting to examine closely the moments when the voices and words of those who have the power to define, become inarticulate or silent.

In Beloved (1987), Toni Morrison foregrounds the same issue. When four men on horse back arrive to take the fugitive slave Sethe back to the ironically named Sweet Home, she darts to a wooden shed and attempts to kill her four children.[35] Morrison weaves historical fact with fiction and details with irony the responses of the white men. Here, it is the nephew who poses the questions which, though articulate, register his fear, confusion, and inability to comprehend the nature of the carnage in front of him. The only way he has of absorbing the sight is to quite literally put himself in the picture, and make a futile and facetious attempt to assess what he would have done had he been in the position of a fugitive slave mother. As he attempts to reason:

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34 The irony at this moment of course is that he has come to declare their freedom. He, the Yankee soldier is perhaps the most inappropriate white man to bear witness to the final scene, because he is a native of the free states in the North, where fugitive slave laws but not the institution of slavery were instated. The Northern States of America became populated with fugitive slaves. DuBois notes that although it is difficult to detail the number of slaves who escaped from slavery, "the black population of the North increased from 130,00 in 1820 to 345,000 in 1860 ... it seems that at least 100,000 of them were fugitives from slavery and represented a loss of at least $25,000,000 in invested capital" (The Seventh Son 2:419-420).

35 See Karen Donnelly, "Redefining Destruction: The Liberation of the Medea Figure in Western Literature" Diss. Southern Connecticut State University 1993. Donnelly observes that Euripides' Medea is also encountered in the work of modern contemporary writers including Morrison's Beloved.

> What she go and do that for? On account of a beating? Hell he'd been beat a million times and he was white ... But no beating ever made him ... I mean no way he could have ... What she go and do that for? And that is what he asked the sheriff. (150)

What the nephew fails to acknowledge in his rational questioning is an awareness of the history and oppression of slavery. He has only read the scene as if Sethe signifies whiteness, as opposed to blackness and femaleness.

At the level of detail and historico-racial themes, Beloved bears a number of similarities to It's Morning.[36] Like Cissie, Sethe is also a slave, but has escaped from the Sweet Home farm to live further north in Cincinnati.[37] A brief background to her life is necessary here in order to provide a context which results in her murdering one child and injuring three others.

Sethe lived as a slave on Sweet Home farm with her slave husband and three slave children. A number of other black men were Sweet Home slaves, but Sethe was the only female slave. The master and his wife, Mr and Mrs Garner are shown to be *liberally* inclined, insofar as they attempt to treat the slaves as if indeed they are human. Thus Mr Garner trusted the men and allowed them to carry guns. As Sethe points out in a conversation with her husband, "him and her ... they ain't like the whites I seen before ... They talk soft for one thing ... Mr Garner let you buy your mother ... "(195). When Mr Garner dies, Mrs Garner lives alone with her slaves for more than two years before finally writing to her brother-in-law, a schoolteacher, "to come take over" the running of the farm (197). There is a witty and incisive observation and detail that always suggests in Beloved a narrator who exists just beyond the framework of the narrative, an apparently innocent narrator who comments on the lives of both the blacks and whites, men, women and children. Thus, when the slaves gather to discuss why Mrs Garner

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36 I am interested here only in the thematic concerns of Beloved, as opposed to the specific narrative strategies that Morrison employs in her other fictional works. That said, one cannot ignore her contributions to the Western and African-American literary canons, aptly acknowledged with her receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in November 1993. There are numerous essays criticisms and unpublished theses on Morrison's fictional strategies which offer a more in-depth analysis of her novels. I offer a selection of these in recognition of the body of critical inquiry that her own fiction has generated. Susan Willis, "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison", in Black Literature and Literary Theory (ed.) Henry Louis Gates 263-283; Homi Bhaba, The Location of Culture 1-18; "Re-Weaving the `Ulysses Scene': Enchantment, Post-Oedipal Identity, and the Buried Text of Blackness in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon" in, Comparative American Identities (ed.) Hortense Spillers; "The Quest for Self: Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison" in Black Women Writers: Arguments and Interviews (ed.) Mari Evans (London: Pluto Press, 1985) 346-360. Darwin T Turner, "Theme, Characterization, and Style in the Works of Toni Morrison" in Black Women Writers 361-369; Sally Keenan, "'Four Hundred Years of Silence': Myth, History, and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Beloved" in Recasting the World: Writing After Colonialism (ed.) Jonathan White (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993) 45-81; Elaine Jordan, "'Not My People': Toni Morrison and Identity" in Black Women's Writing (ed.) Gina Wisker; Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992).

37 Margaret Garner also lived in Cincinnati, an example of Morrison fictionalising historical detail.

after two years decides to appoint her brother-in-law as the new master, the unseen narrator comments:

> Well, that's the way it was. Nobody counted on Garner dying. Nobody thought he could. How 'bout that? Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces. Now ain't that slavery or what is it? (220)

Under the puritanical domination of Mrs Garner's brother-in-law, known to the slaves as "schoolteacher", an escape is planned over many months, until eventually, "they only have to wait through spring" (223). A series of "buts" however, are structured by Morrison, in the narrative in such a way as to highlight the paucity of the plan. Thus:

> But. Sethe was pregnant in Spring ...
>
> But. Neighbours ... who now feel free to visit Sweet Home might appear in the right place at the wrong time.
>
> But. Sethe's children cannot play in the kitchen anymore.
>
> But. Sixo (a slave) is tied up with the stock at night ... (223)

and so on, seemingly, *ad infinitum*. As soon as the reader sees that the great plan to escape is riddled with problems which will hamper the fugitives, the section ends with "But. They had to alter it - just a little" (223), totally deflating the idea of an unproblematic escape.

Sethe manages to escape, along with some of the slave men. Their journey to freedom however is prefigured by the "buts", and not all of them manage to escape. Neither can Sethe's arrival at the house of her mother-in-law be called successful. The fact of her arrival is contrasted with the conditions in which she arrives, having given birth *en route*, with the aid of a white girl, to her youngest daughter, in the bushes. Her exhaustion from the journey, the birth and the loss of Halle (her husband), the memory of terror and degradation under the new master, all contribute to the miracle of her arriving without getting caught.

Much time and money was spent trying to retrieve fugitive slaves in the nineteenth century.[38] Since slaves were marketable and often valuable commodities, slave masters would advertise their loss, promising a handsome reward for captured

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38 Jacobs in her autobiography describes the lengths that her own and other slave masters went to in order to re-capture their slaves. Large sums of money were promised for the capture of the fugitives, on occasions, dead or alive. See also Goodell, "The Slave being Property may be hampered or confined to prevent his escape; may be pursued and reclaimed; must not be aided, or concealed from his Master; and when too wild or refractory to be *used* by his Owner, may be *killed* by him with impunity." (ix); see also 98-106.

slaves. Schoolteacher, when he arrives at the scene where Sethe murdered her child, considers his loss in terms of their marketable value:

> Right off it was clear, to school-teacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four - because she'd had the one coming when she cut), pickaninnies they had hoped were alive ... to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not.... [T]he woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup. pressed his collars the way he liked them besides having at least ten breeding years left (149).

It is schoolteacher's final point that raises once again the issue of the black female body in slavery. It is clear from his statement that schoolteacher, in keeping with other slave masters, would either rape her or encourage his male relations to rape her, perhaps even force her to have children with other slave men, especially as Sethe is the only woman on Sweet Home. When he acknowledges that she still has ten breeding years left, he is acknowledging the economic gain that he can make from her body.[39] Her children become not only his property, but potentially a great source of profit, all the more profitable if they are girl slaves, for they too develop into breeders and so continue to supply the economic base necessary to sustain the institution. Without black women as slaves, one can speculate that the institution would have perished within forty to fifty years.

Sethe attempts to murder all the children because she wants to save them from the "Demon slavery",[40] but she also, like Cissie, attempts to out-manoeuvre the slave master by denying him her body and her children, who are literally speaking, *of/from* her body.

"When the four horse men came - schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff", (148) Sethe, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs and friends were gathered for a celebration, in the same way that Millie's sacrifice was also prefigured by a New Year's eve party. Unlike It's Morning however, Sethe is not given warning of the men's arrival, although one could conjecture that she always considered the possibility of being captured and returned to Sweet Home. In Beloved, it is the narrator functioning as the Chorus who provides the detailed commentary and analysis of the situation from the arrival of the men, to the moment when Sethe is taken to jail, with her youngest daughter. Whereas in Graham's dramatic text, the characters and scene develops from a "bright morning", to the final scene in which everybody is huddled together in the dark

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39 Davis notes that female slaves were more profitable than male slaves, presumably because they were able to be utilised as breeders while simultaneously performing traditional "male tasks", 3-29; see also Susan A Mann, "Slavery Sharecropping And Sexual Inequality" Signs 14 (1989): 774-798.

40 A term frequently employed by Harriet Jacobs to describe the institution of slavery.

house, (the sun not having risen), the parallel scene in Beloved takes place during the day. However, with the fugitive Sethe in the shed surrounded by the white men and her neighbours, the stillness that permeates the scene gives a similar impression to that of It's Morning. Morrison's attention to the perception of the white men who arrive to capture Sethe is crucial to both the image and tension she creates in the reader's mind. For the reader, the moment takes on a filmic quality, as she relates the (silent) running commentary and observations of the slave catchers. In doing so, she recreates the mixture of terror and resignation, hope and sense of futility that the Chorus of slave women experience in It's Morning. It also allows the slave catchers to speak for themselves, as it were. Consequently, the slave catchers through their dialogue reveal to the reader their racist and sexist mind-set as they define the situation and the community of black people that they encounter at the scene. Schoolteacher's assessment of his economic loss in the form of Sethe's battered children, and the nephew's incredulity and inability to understand why Sethe goes to such extremes when the worst she could suffer would be physical violence, speaks to the way in which the slaveholding class were so blinded to their own inhumanity that the desperate measures taken by the slaves were always incomprehensible to the slave master.[41] When the narrator describes the attempts of fugitive slaves to escape from the plantations, it is with the same amusement and detachment with which master Charles kicks Cissie out of his path. Thus the narrator, speaking from the position of the slavecatcher, maintains:

> sometime you could never tell, you'd find them folded up tight somewhere ... Caught red-handed, they would seem to recognise the futility of outsmarting a white man and the hopelessness of out-running a rifle. Smile even, like a child caught dead with his hands in the jelly jar. The very nigger with his head hanging, and a little jelly jar smile on his face ... could all of a sudden roar, like bull, and commence to do unbelievable things ... So you had to keep back a pace, leave the tying to the other. Otherwise, you ended up killing what you were supposed to bring back alive (148).

When the men open the shed where Sethe has taken refuge with her four children, the reader, unlike the spectator of It's Morning, is confronted with Sethe savaging a child. They become witnesses to the act of "gross pollution". Their presence does not deter her: "she did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time" (149).

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41 Or indeed to Stanley Elkins who insists that "regarding matters of police and discipline, it is hardly necessary to view the typical slave's lot in the nineteenth-century as one of stripes and torture. Indeed, we should probably not stretch the truth greatly were we to concede Ulrich Phillips' sympathetic picture of a just regime tempered with paternal indulgence on the majority of well-run plantations." (Slavery 56)

In this moment, the men are unable to define what they see or the woman they see in front of them. She has exceeded their stereotypical understanding of the female slave. The woman in the shed with a "blood soaked child" held to her chest does not correspond to the nigger with the "little jelly jar smile", nor to "the roaring bull". She has not been caught attempting to conceal herself, nor has their presence disturbed or disrupted her. It only remains then, for schoolteacher to express or rather conceal his horror - a horror spared the spectator in It's Morning - by reverting to a familiar and common-sense discourse: that of comparing Sethe to domestically trained animals, as if this allows him to understand the nature of the scene before him. Thus, he ruminates:

> Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew telling him to think - just think - what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education. Or Chipper of Samson. Never again would you trust them in the woods ... You'd be feeding them maybe holding out a piece of rabbit in your hand and the animal would revert - bite your hand clean off. So he punished that nephew by not letting him come on the hunt. Make him stay ... feed stock ... tend crops. See how he liked it (149).

This wholly inappropriate response to the carnage he has just witnessed not only resonates with non-understanding, but also a need to displace the image and the possibility of understanding the situation. Although his language suggests a matter-of-fact if uninformed assessment of the scene in the shed, it also betrays his fear at that moment. He chooses to define and understand it in terms of a "reversion to type" because that is the only way that the dominant ideology of the time has positioned him to think. To think beyond the prevailing discourse of race is impossible at that moment. Even the absence of an instinctive and/or physical response speaks to the way in which the ideological framework has resulted in an absolute regulation of thoughts and response to the African-American slave. What the ideology does allow for is a crude comparison of negroes with animals, with the bestial. It is no surprise that schoolteacher's initial response is to chastise his nephew; not for treating her like an animal, but for beating her beyond the point that he would beat one of the Sweet Home animals.

Again and again, their (particularly schoolteacher's) assessment of Sethe's act is wide of the mark. Had Sethe been treated like the hounds on Sweet Home, or the horses, then it is likely she would have lived a much less brutal existence. However, her savage and brutal act of murder is in proportion to the brutality she endures, and the repeated physical and psychological degradation of her self. Only the time span differs. The men are partial witness to a moment which lasts for seconds. Sethe has been witness and subject to their brutality of Sweet Home slaves for most of her life. In other words, in denying schoolteacher his "pickaninnies" and slave woman with at least ten breeding years still left, she is confronting him with a condensed version of the way in

which the white community in general and the slaveholding class in particular have treated slaves. Her act of infanticide speaks to the appalling treatment of the "sixty million and more slaves"[42] crammed and chained in cargo ships and forced to endure the middle passage. The images of cargoed slaves are not dissimilar to the way in which Sethe traps herself and her children in the "sawdust and dirt" of the shed.[43] Similarly, her brutalisation of the children, her claiming of the children's bodies can be viewed as her response to the way in which her body and the bodies of countless slaves were also brutalised, in the name of a specious civilising tendency which slaves were seen to lack. For as Stamp Paid (the black man who rowed Sethe across the river to freedom) muses: "[w]hitepeople [*sic*] believed that whatever the manners, under every dark-skin was a jungle, swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood" (198). When the men find her, Sethe reaffirms this in their minds. Their inability to understand her motive, and their inarticulacy relative to the scene they witness, result in an apologist's understanding of maltreated animals. What they fail to realise is that

> it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle white folks planted in them. And it grew.... until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one ... so scared were they of the jungle they had made. (199)

If the white male witnesses to the scene refuse to see the effect of their own politico-ideological supremacists' cause, or if they choose to remain locked within confined ideological postulations that view blacks as at once junglistic *and* domesticated, then Sethe, when they open the shed door, "rememories" for the men "the screaming baboon [that] lived under their own white skin; the red gums [that] were their own" (199)[44] Viewed in this way, it is no surprise that both stutter incoherently or attempt to understand the situation by imposing a facetious rationalist perspective, founded on the correct treatment of domestically trained animals. One could argue that

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42 This is a reference on the frontispiece of Beloved which acknowledges the sixty million slaves who endured the middle passage.

43 I realise that this is a problematic assertion because it aligns slave treatment by the whites with Sethe's treatment of her children, implying a similar motivation. However, the fact remains that when the slave catchers view Sethe and her children they are forced to confront an image of resistance that shocks and unsettles them. The fact that this image is not dissimilar to the cargoed slave who were brought to the New World speaks perhaps to the irony of their response.

44 Morrison employs the term "rememory" to express the latent memories that re-surface in Sethe so that she becomes aware of a reality or moment in her personal history that did not previously exist in her mind. She explains to her daughter that "Some things go on. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory ... somethings you forget. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place - the picture of it - stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world ... the picture is still there and what's more, if you go there - you who never was there, if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again." (36) My point is that Sethe rememories for schoolteacher *et al.* the treatment of slave men and women when she claims her children's bodies and lives.

they are expressing the unspeakable violence of slavery as an institution. Interwoven with the issue of the brutality and maltreatment of the slaves is the recurring theme of the black female body.

While acknowledging parallels between the bodies of the children which legally belong to the slave master alongside the act of infanticide as a form of resistance, it is also possible to view the body of the black female slave as a site on and through which inscriptions and competing discourses are repeatedly written and played out. When her body defies and transgresses Christian morality and slavery's ethics as imposed by the slaveholding class, then the body becomes the axis or focal point for resistance. Both Sethe and Cissie endure repeated rape and physical brutality in the form of whipping. Sethe also had her breast milk stolen from her by the nephew. She tells Paul D:

> "After I left you, those boys come in there and took my milk.... Held me down and took it. I told Mrs Garner on em.....Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."
>
> "They used cowhide on you?"
>
> "And they took my milk"
>
> "They beat you and you was pregnant?"
>
> "And they took my milk" (16-17)

Sethe and Cissie effectively have their bodies denied them, not only because of the maltreatment they endure, but because the bodies are repeatedly denigrated and inscribed with signs that demonstrate white male brutality.[45]

II Theorizing The Black Female Subject

When schoolteacher tells one of his pupils that in order to draw Sethe properly, he must put her "human characteristics on the left; her animals ones on the right", and "to line them up" (193), it is an acknowledgement, through negative definition, of the way in which Sethe and black women in general are perceived as not entirely human and not entirely female. Thus although the black woman is biologically speaking female, she, in this instance Sethe, cannot claim the status of (white) womanhood because she is black; and while black men are subject to racial oppression, and viewed

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45 As Henderson argues, this brutality results in Sethe's body becoming a "*tabula rasa* upon which the racial/sexual identity of the other(s) can be positively inscribed" (69).

as inherently inferior to the white male of any class, black manhood *per se* is not discriminated against as womanhood is.[46]

There are a number of references in historical and contemporary discourses to black women's double default as I have chosen to term it. In 1892, Ann J Cooper, an advocate of emancipation for African-American men and women, addressed the issue directly when she acknowledged that "the colored woman of today occupies ... a unique position in this country.... She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem." (hooks, Ain't I A Woman 166). In The Souls of Black Folks (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois describes the double consciousness of all African-Americans whether male or female, and acknowledges a

> "peculiar sensation resulting from the fact that one ever feels his twoness, an American, a negro, two unrecoiling strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a negro and an American." (2-3)

Later black scholars articulate this same "sensation" with black women particularly in mind and consequently view Du Bois' notion of "twoness" as double or multiple jeopardy.[47]

Taking the act of infanticide as one of the ways in which black women offered resistance to the oppression of slavery and viewing it as an attempt to reconstruct, or reinvent the self and the body, it is necessary to widen the focus to discuss where the black female subject stands within a contemporary mainstream white and patriarchal ideology. For it follows that as history has helped to shaped blackness and femininity, it has projected a very specific notion of both which has filtered into prevailing notions of black womanhood. In order to ascertain how the black female subject is constructed within the confines of a prevailing ideology, an ideology which works ceaselessly to erase difference and posit the unity and centrality of the subject in all ideology and discourse, it is necessary to discuss how the black female subject is variously positioned according to contemporary liberal-humanist discourse.[48] This will involve a discussion

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46 hooks for example is insistent in her belief that "white people are saying via their manipulation of black roles [on television for example] that they accept black men but not black women." (Ain't I A Woman 67)

47 See for example Selwyn Cudjoe, "Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement", in Black Women Writers, 6-24; Deborah K King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of A Black Feminist Ideology", Signs 14:1988 42-72.

48 I am grateful to my supervisor Professor Susan Bassnett for highlighting the problems of employing the term liberal humanism which might be seen as a restrictive category. I have not overlooked her observation but wish to point out that liberal-humanist ideology and discourse is by its very nature restricting. As I point out in section three and the conclusion, within a liberal-humanist ideology and discourse, certain ideas cannot, it seems, be expressed positively, precisely because of the limitations of liberal-humanist discourse which censors and/or forecloses the possibilities that exceed its norms. It would perhaps be easier to speak in terms of mainstream white ideology/discourse, but this is both too vague and too broad and in itself, it does not speak

that examines the degree to which normative or materialist feminist discourses are relevant to a black womanhood that has undergone an undeniably problematic ideological construction, bearing in mind that those same feminist discourses are themselves borne out of liberal humanist postulations even while they seek to dislodge mainstream patriarchal ideology.[49]

The overall aim of this section is to explore black female subjectivity and the shifts it has undergone and continues to undergo within contemporary liberal humanist ideology. Consequently where I position myself in relation to various discourses will be of primary importance here, insofar as I am a black female intellectual with a particular response to the discourses and ideologies which I will be discussing

If one is of the view that a critical reassessment of African-American history leads to a more critical and rigorous assessment of the present, then there is an inevitability in problematising, or revealing as problematic, the apparent cohesiveness of contemporary society and its attendant ideology. Contemporary society, shaped by history,[50] which in turn has been regulated by an ideologically constructed language, seeks not to lay bare inconsistencies or contradictions within itself, but to mask, and elide these factors, so that the emphasis is always on compatibility and cohesion, as opposed to differences and fragmentation.[51] One can only view this as the perfect lie, in the same way that the view of plantation life as idyllic in nineteenth-century ideology was an aberration in terms of white supremacist ideology, because it at once sanctioned the brutality used to *tame* recalcitrant and non-recalcitrant slaves, while suggesting that African-Americans were content with such maltreatment, hence the idyll of slavery. Arguably, contemporary liberal humanist ideology is no less paradoxical at the level of reality for it posits the subject/self as being at the centre of language and ideology, and

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to my need to address the particular practice of restriction or closure that might be seen as characteristic of post-Enlightenment or liberal-humanist discourse and ideology.

49 See Jane Flax, "The End of Innocence", in Feminists Theorize The Political 445-463, Flax acknowledges that "white feminist politics in the West since the 1960s have been deeply rooted in and dependent upon Enlightenment discourses" (446-7). It is important, I think, to acknowledge from the outset the philosophical foundation upon which theories and discourses are predicated, otherwise there is a danger of reproducing "the Enlightenment hope ... that utilizing truthful knowledge in the service of legitimate power will assure both freedom and progress" (447). See also Chris Weedon, Feminist Practice and Post Structuralist Theory (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Weedon maintains that "most radical-feminist discourse also assumes a humanist essence of womanhood" (80-81). Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

50 Riley's view in relation to women's experience is that "historical analysis reads social upheaval [as] producing experience" (100), rather than experience being a "natural" phenomenon. The same can be said, I think, for African-American experience and its attendant histories.

51 This (now) commonly held view forms the basis of feminist postmodern and poststructuralist discourses. See by way of example Denise Riley, 96-114; Donna Haraway "A Manifesto For Cyborgs"; Linda Singer, "Feminism and Postmodernism", in Feminists Theorize the Political; Chris Weedon, Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory; bell hooks, "Post Modern Blackness" in Yearning 23-32; Chris Weedon, Andrew Tolsen and Frank Mart "Theories of Language and Subjectivity" in Culture, Media and Language (ed.) Stuart Hall *et al.* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1980) 195-216.

by implication, in a position to make choices and decisions which are based wholly on free will and/or consensus. In reality, however, so-called consensus and free will are always loaded with constraints that must necessarily regulate the framework of society. Whether such regulation is overtly oppressive and tyrannical will depend on the aims of the dominant groups in the society. Thus, the slaveocracy, which conferred sub-human status on to slaves, did so partly to define its own absolute racial supremacy. This is borne out by the fact that by the end of slavery, skin colour and complexion alone were determining factors in how one was perceived. Thus it was quite normal under the circumstances of the time, for one to be considered light enough to *pass* (as white) and not unheard of for mixed-race individuals to pass without ever being *discovered* as being black. The entire society then, black and white, needed to internalize the colour spectrum and the privileges or otherwise attached to each colour gradation, in order for the notion of *passing* to be effective.[52]

Classic liberal humanist discourse, according to Weedon (1987) presupposes "an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent" (32). The language of liberal humanist ideology purports to be transparent. Language, or "the word", is seen as a stable and fixed signifier which communicates the absolute reality of the subject.[53] Its very fixity and stability, the fact that language/the word is always constructed as communicating the truth, or a set of truths, means that the subject within

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52 Passing as white is a complex racial (racist) historical and contemporary phenomenon. According to K Russell, M Wilson, and R Hall, authors of The Color Complex (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992) "traditionally the color complex involved light-skinned Blacks' rejection of Blacks who were darker" (192). They note that as early as 1790, Black business organisations of free people of color "was restricted to those whose skin was light to medium brown". They also observe that of Du Bois' Talented Tenth ninety-nine per cent composed a "mulatto" elite making it abundantly clear "that possessing a degree of mixed ancestry was a definite asset when it came to being considered a voice for the Negro race" (32). The contemporary academic term employed by these authors for passing is "deracinated Blacks". They point out that "some deracinated Blacks with light-enough skin and keen-enough features have abandoned their heritage altogether ... [l]ike deracination, the phenomenon of 'passing' is hardly limited to African Americans ... in Nazi Germany Jews passed as Protestant; in today's army [i.e. before Clinton's legislation banning discrimination against gays and lesbians] gay men and women pass as straight ... [i]n each case, the reason is traceable to some sort of discrimination (73). The politics and ideology of passing tends not to receive a great deal of attention because as the authors point out "[m]ost Blacks are careful about letting Whites in" on *intra*-racial problems. More recently, however, prominent Black entertainment figures have played a major part in re-fuelling the debate. Not least singer and song-writer Michael Jackson for his alleged multiple cosmetic surgery operations to lighten his skin and make his facial features more aqualine. Passing is not limited to passing as white, and being successful or unsuccessful. It has an attendant ideology that inevitably influences every aspect of the *victim's* life. For fictional and dramatic renderings of passing or themes related to passing see: Nella Larsen, Passing (New York: Albert Knopf, 1926); Zora Neale Hurston, Colorstruck in Black Female Playwrights; Maya Angelou, Gather Together In My Name (1974; London: Virago, 1985), in which Angelou describes how two friends by way of an insult inform her that her infant son is light enough to pass; See also Peggy Phelan, Unmarked 1-33 in which she analyses the work of Adrian Piper, a mixed race American visual artist. Phelan describes Pipers "representational frame-up" as one that challenges the viewers "habitual notion that race is visibly marked on skin ... [t]he decision to "identify" as an African-American or to "pass" as white ... is part of an on-going performance of identity (7-8).

53 Weedon develops this more fully 74-106.

the liberal-humanist framework is also perceived as a unified, centralised or privileged entity. As Weedon argues, liberal humanist discourses rest on the assumption that subjectivity is the coherent, authentic source of the interpretation of the meaning of *reality* (8).

Since language, the purveyor of knowledge and rationality, is seen as the means to communicate the reality of the subject, and language is a transcendental signifier, humanism gives to the subject the power to apparently speak to the truth of her/his reality (experience), or her/his being through a medium which is believed to be unbiased, self-generating, and true.[54] The result is that from a liberal humanist perspective certain sets of experiences, accorded to the subject, are always viewed as real, because they are *of the subject;* the subject has the form of language which translates all experiences and realities, exactly as is required. Thus language, always perfectly tailored to the experiential, (according to liberal humanist assumptions) becomes a universal signifier. In turn, the universification of language inevitably results in certain experiences being perceived as universal. Universality then becomes the signifier that registers absolute truths which historically and contemporarily remain the same.

Whereas Du Bois' negro subject always felt "his twoness", the subject in liberal humanism always feels her oneness, her sense of self as essentially unified. The multiple consciousness that contemporary black feminist scholars align with black female subjecthood is, for the liberal humanist subject (who understands the power of language to communicate and transform experience into a universal discourse) not conceivable. The accommodating tendencies of humanism would then, seem to enable all that is of the subject to be encompassed within a transcendental form that admits no contradictions or inconsistencies. Naturally however, a postulation that admits no flaws, embracing every subject along with every reality and/or experience, under the title of universal, needs to be viewed with not a little suspicion, and its own magnanimity interrogated. For while liberal humanism appears to privilege "the sovereignty of the individual" (Weedon 84), stressing the desirability and universality of oneness, or a unified self, it does so at the expense of potential or actual "twoness", or multiple selves. Needless to say, the subject within contemporary liberal humanism might not be so pliable, were it not for the function and ability of ideology to keep the wider liberal humanist context fixed.

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54 Julia Kristeva does justice to the debate on language and subjectivity, in a number of essays including "From One Identity To Another" Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Art and Literature (Oxford: Blackwell 1981) 124-147; "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident", and "Women's Time" in The Kristeva Reader (ed.) Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). Future page references to the latter volume will follow the citation.

There are, however, competing terms and discourses, such as post-structuralist feminist theory, which seek to challenge the universalist premise of liberal humanist discourse in order to posit theoretical alternatives which might be viewed as more (theoretically) consistent with late twentieth-century post-industrial society. "The plurality of language and the impossibility of fixing meaning once and for all are basic principles of post-structuralism", Weedon argues (84). Upon this premise, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva develop theories of (female) subjectivity in contemporary Western society.[55] This body of post-structuralist inquiry results in a discourse that offers an explicit challenge to liberal humanist assumptions that language is transparent and subjectivity is fixed.[56] However, as Weedon points out, post-structuralist analysis "does not mean that meaning disappears altogether, but that any interpretation is at best temporary, specific to the discourse within which it is produced and open to challenge" (85). Cixous (1981), for example, questions women's relationship to signifying practice in Western contemporary society given that "the classic opposition, dualist and hierarchical, Man/Woman automatically means great/small, superior/inferior". Kristeva, who employs psychoanalysis (as does Cixous) to develop her theories of the subject, argues that "it is impossible to treat problems of signification seriously, without including in these considerations the *subject* ... as operating consciousness" (Kristeva, Desire in Language 131)

The psychoanalytic impulse behind the theories of Kristeva and Cixous distinguishes them from liberal humanist feminists and materialist feminists. Whereas

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55 As ever, there is a danger of oversimplifying the works of these two (feminist) theoreticians and herding them together under the general title of post-structuralist feminists or French feminists simply because they are now nationalised French citizens. It needs to remembered that firstly, as Butler and Scott point out in Feminists Theorize the Political, "post-structuralism is not strictly speaking a position, but rather a critical interrogation of the exclusionary operations by which positions are established."(xiv). Secondly, Kristeva is a Bulgarian, as Lucy Hughes-Hallet points out in her article "Egghead Out of Her Shell." (Independent on Sunday. 9 Feb. 1992 26-27.); while Cixous is Algerian (see Verena Andermatt Conley, Hélène Cixous (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) (xiii)). I am also alerted to the fact that the essays and critical analyses of both women dating from around the 1970s can result in an over-generalised and clichéd assessment of their work, this perhaps because their work has undergone constant critical appraisal and translation, more so perhaps than other "French feminists" (excepting perhaps Luce Irigary). For the sake of my brief references to Cixous and more detailed references later on, to Kristeva, I will refer to them collectively as feminist theoreticians. I shall not however, in referring to their work, attempt to speak for the whole movement of feminism in France. The final point to make is that doubtless some will find my inclusion of Cixous and Kristeva problematic as a basis for moving towards articulating a black feminist epistemology. It *is* problematic. While I remain attentive to Gayatri C Spivak's observations in "French Feminism in an International Frame", (in Gayatri Spivak In Other Worlds: Essays In Cultural Politics (New York: Methuen, 1987) 134-153) *vis-à-vis* the arrogating statements of both feminist theoreticians on behalf of "women", the major concern here is not to posit theories for black female subjectivity that are in any way politically correct, but to engage in an intellectual battlefield in order to ascertain possibilities (potentials) from where I am located.

56 I am referring specifically to Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology (tran.) Gayatri C Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976; Jacques Lacan, Écrits: A Selection (tran.) Alan Sheridan (1966; London: Tavistock, 1977); Roland Barthes, Image Music Text (London: Fontana 1977); also The Pleasure of the Text (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

the post-structuralist principle adopted by Cixous and Kristeva "propose[s] a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (Weedon 33), the subject of Marxist and radical-feminist versions of humanism develop their theories in keeping with the idea that women possess a "true nature [which] is seen as distorted or repressed by the structure of capitalist and patriarchal societies"(Weedon 80). Exploiting the work of those whom Elaine Showalter terms "the white fathers of academia", (13) in order to advance a feminist critique of contemporary Western discourses and ideology, demonstrates the way in which women are always in danger of relying on masculinist discourses for an understanding of their reality and their oppression. Thus in the eighties, after Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) and other essays along with those of Julia Kristeva had been translated for Signs, the work of these two French feminists was generally regarded with suspicion or challenged for its Eurocentricism.[57]

I have highlighted this debate (which does not fully belong here), because in itself it exemplifies the varying positions in which I find myself as a black female intellectual seeking to articulate theories of subjectivity predicated on differences that themselves are not fixed entities. The very divisions between the varying feminist schools of thought based on allegiances to psychoanalysis, materialism, notions of difference, essentialism and so on, foreground for me a politico-intellectual crisis.[58] If I, as a black female subject within patriarchal ideology/discourse, ask "where is she?", or more appropriately: "where am I?", then I must acknowledge - in keeping with the liberal humanist and/or materialist feminist scholars - that I am confined by an ideology that neither speaks for me, nor acknowledges my black female-ness within its schema. Therefore, I am subject to a mainstream ideology and discourse that by virtue of its centralised position renders certain sets of experience, including my own, marginal or

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57 French feminist theory came under interrogation from a number of quarters, perhaps most notably perhaps Gayatri Spivak. Spivak challenges the Eurocentric presumptions of Cixous' philosophy of *écriture féminine* along with Kristeva's observations of Chinese women. Gayatri Spivak in "French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics" Feminists Theorize the Political 54-85; here Spivak attempts to reassess her previous essay, arguing that "I have come to think that there can be exchange between metropolitan and post-colonial feminisms.... When I wrote "French Feminism In An International Frame" my subject position, even if only partly assigned by the workings of the ideological apparatus, was that of an ethnic minority who had broken into the university in the United States ... I remain, of course, a Europeanist by training. My belief remains the same: no Europeanist should ignore the once and future global production of "Europe". My question has sharpened: How does the post-colonial feminist negotiate with the metropolitan feminist?" (57-8).In some ways this does not depart from my own feminist critical investigations in this chapter. The arguments levelled at feminist theoreticians and/or post-structuralist feminists in the early 1980s are not dissimilar to the debate characterised by Jane Flax in her essay "The End of Innocence" in Feminists Theorize the Political. She argues that "Post modernism is threatening to some feminists because it radically changes the background assumptions and contexts within which debates about such questions are usually conducted" (446).

58 bell hooks also acknowledges various crises facing African-American scholars. For hooks, these crises result in a need to "reassess our relationship to popular culture and resistance struggle" see "Postmodern Blackness" (29) in Yearning 23-32.

other - solely because neither myself nor my related experiences (or sets of realities) conform to the mainstream interests and notions of reality.

As a black woman partly characterised by what Spivak terms "Europeanist by training"(59), the possibilities for expressing or articulating my selves remain limited with a liberal humanist schema. Discourses which stress the apparent coherency and sovereignty of the subject, be they feminist or otherwise, while perhaps reassuring in their convictions, nevertheless foreclose the possibility of experiencing multiple sets of experiences and realities at any given time. I am therefore always at a remove from both mainstream patriarchal ideology and feminisms predicated on liberal humanism either as a woman, or as a black person, or both.[59] To quote Ann J Cooper, I then begin to occupy a truly "unique position", for I am at once a (race) problem and a (woman) question. (hooks, Ain't I A Woman 166)

I refer again to the crisis that the black female subject is in, whether or not she identifies herself as politically motivated. Ideologically speaking, this is not dissimilar to the position Sethe finds herself in. For just as Sethe and Cissie transgressed white patriarchal rules at the moment of infanticide, in a contemporary context the black female subject remains an aberration within mainstream patriarchy, within normative feminist discourses and even, as Morrison demonstrates, in those social groups where as a black woman she partly constitutes the community. In Beloved, Sethe's one possibility and hope of spiritual and emotional support after the murder of Beloved is the wider black community (who live by a different set of ethics but still within the auspices of white supremacy) and her lover Paul D. However, once he discovers from the cutting that Stamp Paid offers him the truth of Sethe's past, he reminds her that she has got "two feet, not four", causing a "forest", to "spring up between them" (165). In this moment, Paul D sees her in the same way as the schoolteacher quoted above who instructs his pupils to draw Sethe's animal characteristics on the left and line them up with her human features on the right. Unwittingly or otherwise, and despite his own brutal treatment on the Sweet Home plantation by the whites, Paul D assumes the consensual (moral) position established by them and comes to define Sethe as an outsider, as other and therefore marginal to the only social group that can at least articulate or understand aspects of her reality as a fugitive slave woman.

Black feminist scholars have acknowledged what I have termed the crisis of the black female subject and have sought to redefine the position of black women. In her

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59 Weedon goes so far as to argue that while radical feminism and humanist feminist Marxism "presuppose a distortion of subjectivity by patriarchy and capitalism, the solutions which they offer to this problem ... a new separatist women's culture or social revolution on the basis of historical materialist science, imply a removal of politics from the everyday lives of most women. [The] ... failure to address this everyday life has left it open to the hegemony of liberal humanism" (84)

essay "Multiple Jeopardy Multiple Consciousness" Deborah K King[60] argues against a cohesive black female subject. She refuses the notion that the black female subject is a unified entity, in the sense of the liberal humanist subject and moves towards the notion of fragmented or fractured identities, fractured experiences and consequently fractured rather than cohesive interests. She also recognises the metaphor of the forest that Morrison employs in the moment between Sethe and Paul D, arguing that

> [i]ronically, black women are often in conflict with the very same subordinate groups with which we share some interests. The groups in which we find logical allies on certain issues are the groups in which we may find opponents on others ... we have had to manage ideologies and activities that did not address the dialectic of our lives. We are asked to decide with whom to ally, which interests to advance. Should black women's primary ideological and activist commitment be to race, sex or class-based social movement? Can we afford to be monist? Can we afford not to be? (52)

King's closing questions might be seen as typical of the subject within liberal-humanist ideology who perceives that a choice must be made, and processes of elimination enacted in order to comply with notions of allegiance and unity.

In recognising that black women must "decide" and choose between competing ideologies, discourses and interests, King directly addresses the way in which liberal humanism works to reduce the subject to a unified identity which belies any trace of ambiguity at the level of allegiance. This points to another feature of liberal humanist ideology, especially of the last decade. While it has come to recognise differences, culturally, historically, politically, in the form of women's interest, specific racial differences, sexual differences and so on, it has relegated those who identify with such interests to a space that has become known in contemporary discourses as the margins, a designated point beyond the centre which houses those subjects who do not conform to the mainstream ideals of subjectivity. Thus Nancie Caraway, in her study of multicultural feminism argues that "Black women find themselves marked by marginality".[61]

Despite the apparently generous recognition of differences among subjects, the prevailing ideology continues to perceive the so-called marginalised subject as a unified entity even as s/he exhibits differences that necessarily suggest a fragmented, incohesive set of experiences and realities. Patricia Hill Collins, African-American feminist scholar, has attempted to reject the notion of the unified subject and instead

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60 Deborah K King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," Signs 14 (1988): 42-72. Future references to this essay will follow the citation.

61 Nancie Caraway, Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and The Politics of American Feminism (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991) (52). Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

speaks of the way in which she herself, as a black feminist activist and scholar, writes to enhance and acknowledge her shifting and/or fragmented position. This approach to viewing her reality, she also extends to her academic sphere. She argues that

> [i[n order to capture the interconnections of race, gender and social class in Black women's lives and their effect on black feminist thought, I explicitly rejected grounding my analysis in any single theoretical tradition. (xiii)

In recognising the "interconnectedness" of the realities of black women, including herself, she normalises or centralises, as opposed to marginalises, the fragmentary nature of the black female subject and as a consequence of this highlights the eclectic premise of black feminist thought.[62] This acknowledgement of the fundamental differences that govern black female subjectivity is contrary to the ideological process "by which certain assumed qualities are attached to black women"(Hill Collins 7). Hill Collins chooses to reject the assumptions imposed by the liberal humanist ideological process and seeks instead to embrace and write from a position that acknowledges her "training as an objective social scientist and (her) daily experiences as a African-American woman." (xiv) Consequently her study deliberately makes use possessive adjectives such as *I*, *we* and *our* in order to signal her need to reconcile the opposites within herself as a black, female (and) an objective social scientist. In the final analysis, she discovers that the "both/and conceptual stance of Black feminist thought allowed me to be both objective and subjective, to possess both an Afrocentric and a feminist consciousness and to be both a respectable scholar and an acceptable mother" (xiv).[63]

For Hill Collins then, the potential strength of the black female subject in a liberal humanist society lies in her ability not to inhabit the margins, but instead to view herself as being "an outsider-within", which for her is essential to a specific black women's activism. This stance itself, like Du Bois' "peculiar sensation" is for Hill

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62 Phelan would strongly contest this form of visibility politics, a point that I have already raised in chapter one (n39). She believes that there is a "dangerous complicity between progressives dedicated to visibility politics and conservatives patroling the borders of museums, movie houses, and mainstream broadcasting ... both sides believe that greater visibility of the hitherto under-represented leads to enhanced political power.... Insufficient understanding of the relationship between visibility, power, identity and liberation has led both groups to mistake the relation between the real and the representational" (Unmarked 2). Further on in the same chapter she stresses the fact that "I am not suggesting that continued invisibility is the 'proper' political agenda for the disenfranchised, but rather that the binary between the power of invisibility and the impotency of visibility is falsifying" (8).

63 Arguably Hill Collins can be charged with reproducing a binarist scheme with her both/and conceptual stance however, it might also be argued that an "Afrocentric consciousness" is itself replete with myriad political, social, historical possibilities, in the same way that a feminist consciousness is. Butler and Scott acknowledge that there are problems involved in attempting to "theorize the split or multiple "subjects of feminism" and question how such theories might be constructed.

Collins "a peculiar marginality that stimulates a special black women's perspective" (11).

Schools of feminist thought which argue for a totalised notion of woman and gender oppression fail to recognise the fact that the black female subject cannot be homogenised within the mainstream notion of "woman", and neither, as King points out, can black women's experiences be seen to belong solely to the equally misleading arena of black issues/culture.[64] What seems to re-emerge in the debate of where the black woman stands in relation to subordinate groups and mainstream ideology as a whole are the relentless shifts that she must make as a subject so that her subjectivity is never fixed or unified, and rarely knowable. Referring specifically to the fictive slave women in Beloved and It's Morning, and to their daily reality which leads them to murder their children who by law, belong to the master; it seems that they become unidentifiable/unknowable according to white slaveholders' perceptions of them as slave breeders and black men's perceptions of them as mothers. This is because, for both social groups, they make a choice that contradicts the fixed nature of "breeder" who is supposed to nurture as opposed to murder her offspring. It is the mother's choices as well as black (slave) women's that arguably make them a social group distinct from men: black and white; and whites: men and women.

Within contemporary liberal humanist ideology the black female subject maintains distinct social positions and perspectives. Caraway (1991) acknowledges King's and Hill Collins' subjective positions as black women and argues that discourse must be self critical and self-referential if it is to be representative (53). Self-referentiality seems to be important here, because it rejects the universalist assumptions that liberal humanist discourse bestows on the subject. Thus Caraway argues:

> Black culture, then in King's reading, is not a wholly rewarding realm of positive attributes available to Black women, but a potential site of oppression and exclusion. All communities, she implies, are traversed by changeable social and political dynamics whose dichotomous tendencies even the empowering attributes of Afrocentricism can't always override. This `both/or' orientation of Black women locates them in a contradictory space where they belong and yet don't belong, where they are simultaneously a member of a group yet distinct from that same group. King theorizes an `interactive model' to capture this protean quality ... King thus points to slippage in the project of determining a Black woman's standpoint, suggesting that the social positions we inhabit, theoretically rendered, place us all inescapably in a `centric' bind. We can 'see' selectively from a vantage point that is invested with certain interests, which can sometimes work to overshadow other interests. This insight - that all knowledge can be *located*, as a point of view, as perspectival - is itself a resource of post-modernist thought. It

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64 She argues that black women find themselves marginal to both women's liberation struggles and black liberation struggles see, "Multiple Jeopardy Multiple Consciousness" (52).

> mandates that our theories be self-critical and self referential about where (and on whom) we stand in communities and cultures (53).[65]

In this statement, Caraway moves towards articulating, not only the position that the black female subject occupies, (acknowledging the peculiar marginality of black female subjectivity), she also speaks of a "centric bind". This contradictory assertion can perhaps be the starting point for a black feminist epistemology. For while recognising that black feminist theory allows its subjects to employ "the more removed conventions of empirical theory-building", Caraway also acknowledges, as do the Scott and Butler (1992), that black feminist theory is "at the interface of two important theoretical and epistemological projects - post-colonial discourse and feminist post-modernism" (7).

III The "Outsider Within"

In a section entitled "The Shape of Activism", Hill Collins, offers the black female subject the possibility of re-defining her relationship to the forces of production. Employing a Marxist discourse, she examines black women's disempowerment within a class structure and labour market that necessarily exploits and oppresses its economic base in order to realise material profit.[66] Thus she comments, from her interviews with black domestic workers, that

> These black women knew that they could never belong to their white "families", that they were economically exploited workers and thus would remain outsiders. The result was a curious outsider-within stance,

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65 A number of post-modern and post-structuralist feminists make similar claims *vis-à-vis* what Caraway terms the perspectival. This theoretical position is generally adopted in recognition of difference as a politico-theoretical concept that informs discourse. Phelan for example argues that "identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other ... it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other ... there is always loss, the loss of not being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being " (13). See also Gayatri Spivak "French Feminism Revisted" and "French Feminism In An International Frame" in Gayatri Spivak in Other Worlds 54-85; J W Scott, "Experience", in Feminists Theorize the Political 22-40 who argues that "we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as constituted relationally" (25); Scott and Butler xii-xvii; Christina Crosby, "Dealing With Differences" in Feminists Theorize the Political 103-143; bell hooks, "Choosing The Margin As A Space Of Radical Openness", in Yearning. The contributions of Kristeva to positionality cannot be ignored here and further on in the chapter I draw significantly on her ideas. For a psychoanalytic rendering of positionality, see "From One Identity To Another", in Desire In Language 124-147.

66 I might argue in this instance that there is very little difference between Marxist ideology and liberal-humanist ideology. Both presume a unified subjectivity. However a Marxist discourse would openly acknowledge that the subject and language are ideologically constituted whereas the liberal-humanist version of the same event would replace ideology with "truth" perhaps, or "universality", failing to acknowledge the Marxist view that what is defined as true and/or universal is also ideologically implicated.

> a peculiar marginality that stimulated a special Black women's perspective (11).

The notion of a subject who is both outside and within speaks to the contradictions that are a result, not of the subject, but of the way the structures within liberal humanist ideology operate so that there is an apparently clearly defined centre and margin. Hill Collins who coins the both/and stance along with the outsider-within perspective, throws liberal humanist notions of a unified, centralised true subject into disarray. She also re-defines the ideologically implicated notion of centre and margin by positing the black female subject "within". This within, then, speaks to the *position* of the subject, outsider to the status of the subject. It is not too far removed from Caraway's previous statement, in which she speaks of a centric bind; in other words, she (Caraway) argues for the way in which all subjects are inescapably positioned centrally; it is only their status in relation to a perceived norm that results in marginality.

What effects one's relation to the centre, according to Caraway, is the perspective they, in this instance black women, and other subjects employ, relative to each other. In other words, Caraway's belief that we can "see" selectively from a given vantage point, suggests that it is *subjective perception*, based on the way liberal humanism mediates reality and experience, which is of crucial importance when discussing where one is positioned within liberal humanist ideology.

The privileging of the subject's relation and/or perspective to the whole, which both Collins and Caraway employ, as opposed to viewing the way in which the whole (ideological framework of humanism) or the socio-political structures mediate and/or oppress the subject, allows the theoretical debate to proliferate. Where I position myself as theorist comes into play here and demonstrates again Caraway's point that self-referentiality is crucial to (feminist) theoretical discourses. In short, where I position myself in relation to that which I critique is fundamental to understanding where I am within liberal humanist ideology. Feminist schools of thought which stress the oppressive nature of patriarchal ideology in general and men in particular fail to acknowledge the perspective of the "oppressed subject. This approach of acknowledging a series of interlocking structures which relegate non-conformists to the margins is in itself problematic. It does not sufficiently acknowledge the fact that the marginalised spaces of liberal humanist ideology are not necessarily positions or points *per se* beyond the centre. One can, as Collins discovers from her interviews with black female domestic workers, also be marginalised (as a black woman) or posited as other, while at the same time being firmly entrenched within structure or institution. Safe-houses for the deviant just beyond the centre of the ideological framework therefore do not exist, for that would imply that one can physically remove oneself from the centre. As Toril Moi categorically states, "*absolute* marginality cannot be had." (Sexual/Textual

169) Processes of socialisation and ideology ensure that this is not an option for the subject. It might be more useful, from a theoretical perspective, to envisage gaps within the institutional constructs which become pockets of margins as opposed to a circumference or perimeter demarcating and designating boundaries, beyond which only the other can survive. This suggests ways in which ideological structures elide contradictions for the sake of a linguistic and subjective coherency, and the outcome, which results in elisions or slippages giving rise to margins or spaces where otherness becomes visible. Taking this to its logical conclusion, it is the very ellipses and slippages within liberal humanist ideology that reveal and define the other subjectively speaking.

It is no longer adequate or sufficient to work by a process of elimination in order to define self and other, margin or centre, oppressed or liberated because the other is not always marked by, and cannot always be defined in terms of what is lacking.[67] This logic will always result in re-affirming the norm. The other in this instance only becomes identifiable if there exists a norm which regulates various criteria. I argue for a more flexible reasoning that allows for non-static positionality within liberal humanist ideology to inform notions of otherness. Thus where any given subject has stood, and is standing, politically, culturally, economically and historically, determines one's relation to the whole and the other. This allows for a subject to be constantly shifting and re-defining itself in relation to other subjects and ideologies.

The notion of the shifting subject is addressed in varying ways by both black feminist scholars and French theoreticians. As has already been mentioned, both King and Hill Collins speak to the fractured/fragmented nature of their lives as black female subjects. For Hill Collins, this fragmentation must needs form the basis of a black feminist epistemology. In assessing the ideas of both scholars, Caraway writes of slippage, which she sees as a feature of the "Black women's standpoint" (58). Caraway's slippage is synonymous with my own term here: shifting. But it is the psychoanalytically informed theoretical postulations of Julia Kristeva that elaborate the arguments on subjectivity and language.[68] Kristeva's essays which deal with women as

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67 A point differently expressed by Deborah K King, who in writing about black women's multiple jeopardy argues that "most applications of the concepts of double and triple jeopardy have been overly simplistic in assuming that the relationships among the various discriminations are merely additive ... racism plus sexism plus classism equals triple jeopardy ... [t]his simple and incremental process does not represent the nature of black women's oppression but ... leads to non-productive assertions that one factor can and should supplant the other. Such assertions ignore the fact that racism, sexism, and classism constitute three interdependent control systems" (47). Arguing more directly to my point, Moi insists that "to see difference principally as a gap between two parts of opposition ... is therefore to impose an arbitrary closure on the differential field of meaning Sexual/Textual Politics (154).

68 Why this sudden switch to a white feminist who grounds her theories in the works of white male psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan? I am fully aware of the fact that there is a danger of being charged at this juncture with an over-reliance on Eurocentric feminist application. However, two things strike me. Firstly, Kristeva's contribution to the subject (in process), language and identity is I

subjects within patriarchal ideology have been met with confusion and accusations of obscurantism. Toril Moi (1985), a commentator on a number of essays by Kristeva, discusses the way in which

> Many women have objected to Kristeva's highly intellectual style of discourse on the grounds that as a woman and a feminist committed to the critique of all systems of power, she ought not to present herself as yet another `master thinker'(Sexual/Textual 169).

Analogously, Alice Jardine states in the introduction to her translation of Kristeva's "Women's Time" "[t]he following article will be judged by many as anti-feminist. I cannot possibly deny that it is" (12). The problem seems to arise from the fact that Kristeva deliberately seeks to work beyond liberal humanist prescriptions whereas liberal humanist feminists work within these. The result is that her work, which draws in meticulous detail on traditional male philosophers and critical thinkers, rejects fixed and stable notions of identity, sexuality, subjectivity and language, and does not speak directly to the (liberal humanist) experience of women as perceived by normative feminists, but instead looks to deconstructing those issues which within liberal humanism remain unchallenged. Thus Moi comments that "for Kristeva, it is not the biological sex of a person, but the subject position she or he takes up that determines their revolutionary potential" (Sexual/Textual 12); and Kristeva, instead of speaking to the marginality of the female subject *per se*, which is the project of the Marxist and materialist feminists, points to "[t]he paradox of the position of women [because] they are at one and the same time central and marginal(ised). (Moi, Sexual/Textual 171) Thus where humanist feminist Elaine Showalter views "texts as transmitting authentic 'human' experience, [with] a traditional emphasis of Western patriarchal humanism [and] ... a good portion of empiricism, [and] fear of male theory" (Moi, Sexual/Textual 76-77), Kristeva responds with a rigorous critique and questions:[69]

> does one not find the pen of many a female writer being devoted to phantasmic attacks against Language and Sign as the ultimate supports of phallocratic power, in the name of a semi-aphonic corporality whose truth can only be found in that which is 'gestural', or 'tonal'? (Kristeva "Women's Time", 33).

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think a useful one. Her pre-Oedipal subject remains unmarked by gender and I would suggest that race, which as Henry Louis Gates remarks (1992) is no more than a trope, is also a sign or mark that could be viewed as being in process. Secondly, like Spivak, I have come to believe (and hopefully this chapter is testimony to that) that "the radical element of the post-colonial bourgeoisie must specifically learn to *negotiate* with the structure of enabling violence that produced her; and the normative narrative of metropolitan feminism is asymetrically wedged in that structure. Simply to resist it as white feminism is to yield privilege to the migrants' and the diasporics' struggle ... and to forget that they too want to inhabit the national subject by displacing it" ("French Feminism Revisited" 58) (emphasis added).

69 Here Moi is writing in response to Showalter's essay on gynocritics "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", in Writing and Sexual Difference (ed.) Elizabeth Abel (Sussex: Harvester, 1982) 9-35.

Here Kristeva is not attacking the female subject *per se*, but those who perceive that language as a sign has been corrupted by a patriarchal influence. While this is true, it is also tempting to speculate to what degree (liberal humanist) language is first an accessory to the liberal humanist tradition, before it is an accessory to a patriarchal condition.

Within countless competing theories of subjectivity, the other and identity, one questions where the black woman is amongst the discourses, or how she has been constructed as the other within liberal humanist assumptions. The first important and telling observation is the fact that a liberal humanist feminist tradition perceives a "bias against women ... while the male-as-norm syndrome persists" (Spender 2). Furthermore, the desire for unity, has resulted in homogenizing the notion of "woman" leading to the questionable belief that "women themselves have constituted a subculture within the frame of a larger society and have been unified by values conventions, experiences, behaviors impinging on each individual" (Showalter 11).

In contrast those subjects who begin, not by taking liberal humanism as the norm, but by questioning its impositions and deconstructing its universalist assumptions, might perceive a subject (female and black) that is not only non-unified, but perpetually in transition, or as Kristeva points out, a subject which is in process. This perception (which she makes in relation to writing) allows us to examine both women's and men's writing from an anti- or non-liberal humanist perspective (Moi, Sexual/Textual 172).

This anti-liberal humanist perspective to which I align myself as a black woman is also adopted to varying degrees by King and Hill Collins. Acknowledging their relation to humanism, both black scholars concede that there is a peculiar sensation linked to being black and female in a post-industrial technocracy. The peculiarity is brought about by an inability to conceive of a unitary self. Refusing to view this as a psychological aberration, Hill Collins and Kristeva see it instead, as both liberating and empowering (if problematic) because it allows the subject to *negotiate* or *strategize* within contemporary humanism from a multiple set of positions, which offer shifting notions of reality as opposed to a so-called true and/or universal reality.

Caraway and Kristeva both acknowledge positioning/perspective in relation to the female and/or black subject, as has already been discussed, and caution against fixity, acknowledging in the first instance that in any case the so-called "bond of sisterhood was always tenuous, strained by the betrayals of white women" (Caraway 87). Caraway also insists in an almost elusive or ungraspable statement, symptomatic of

attempting to write and think beyond liberal humanism, that:[70] "[b]lack feminism teaches us that often we are both simultaneously rooted, grounded, solid, - and not solid" (71).The ambiguous nature of this statement is clarified by Moi who, in summarizing Kristeva, recognises that "if 'femininity' has a definition at all in Kristevan terms, it is simply that which is marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order. The relational definition is as shifting as the various forms of patriarchy itself" (Moi, Sexual/Textual 166). Thus Kristeva's notion of marginality "allows us to view this repression of the feminine in terms of positionality rather than in terms of essences. What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies (Moi, Sexual/Textual 166). This statement reiterates my own assertion and the hypothesis of the present chapter which is seeking to discover the ways in which the black female subject is an inherently anti- or non-liberal humanist subject. This immediately gives rise to problems of naming and disrupts those names which are already common currency. It is important to remain attentive to banner titles such as Anglo-American, French feminist, and so on, which when employed in a liberal humanist context erase and homogenise the internal differences that might exist and serve to differentiate members of a group which stresses alternative ideologies. Earlier I mentioned King who recognises conflicts that occur within subordinate groups. Similarly, Clare Duchen (1986) examines the ways in which the French feminist movement of the sixties, *Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes* (*MLF*), was beset with internal problematics so that "contradictions of different kinds emerged. Women who wanted to maintain 'dual allegiance' found that they were constantly required to justify their continued presence on both fronts."(28) Here then, one encounters the language of liberal humanism, realising that its universalising tendencies do not begin to allow for discourses which speak to non-unitary allegiances. This highlights another debate in which liberal humanist discourse forecloses as opposed to proliferates meaning.

As a black woman, I can only speak to the limitations of those discourses which speak and work from a liberal humanist standpoint. Neither do so-called alternative/minority subcultures and interest groups offer consistent, theoretical and practical alternatives in all instances. The very names, signifying political interests, are themselves misleading, so that I continually feel as though I am situated ambiguously, even within alternative competing ideologies, ideologies which, it must be stressed, cannot be viewed as alternative if they continue to ignore the potentially repressive nature of humanism. Its truths, from the position of one who can only perceive the mythical status of such a posture, do not address other possible alternatives, which shift according to subjective reality. Seen from this perspective, it is evident that the liberal

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70 A point humorously observed by Flax who details the repeated arguments levelled by "some feminists" against post-modernist (and by implication post-structuralist) theory, that "postmodernists write obscurely on purpose so that no one outside their cult can understand them" (44).

humanist construction of language is inadequate; one questions whether the absence of a vocabulary or tangible discourse which speaks to the notion of 'proliferated' selves, is mere coincidence. The term proliferated has been employed here, where other previously mentioned scholars have articulated multiple, shifting or split subjectivities. One cannot help but notice that such terms as "split", or "multiple", when applied to the subject, signal a personality "disorder", so that the subject is in danger once more of being read as abnormal. It highlights the pervasive nature of a (liberal humanist) language which is viewed as universal, because that which cannot be included and articulated through it becomes "deviant". This was the premise upon which white supremacists in the nineteenth-century created a system of routine oppression, which resulted in African-Americans being enslaved because of a perceived racial abnormality/deviancy. Thus Caraway comments on how "the riddle of womanhood under slavery was 'solved' for the Black female slave by placing her ontologically and symbolically, outside the very boundaries of womanhood" (Caraway 84). Black female slaves fought against the racial imposition that stressed their abnormality. Hooks argues that "[t]he white man who yelled at Sojourner "I don't believe you really are a woman", unwittingly voiced America's contempt and disrespect for black womanhood" (hooks Ain't I, 159). While this is feasible, hooks does not sufficiently analyse the challenge thrown at Truth. For in articulating his doubt about her gender subjectivity, the delegate was in effect refusing to accept her position as a non-unified self. He required proof of her biological womanhood, since his own norm of womanhood had already been established by the white woman.[71] He merely articulated his position as a white (and) man, when confronted by a woman, who was also black.

Truth's speech, which is a political analysis observing the contradictions of a patriarchal, liberal humanist world view, articulates the way in which she is outside the framework of patriarchy, while firmly established within it as a slave:

> Look at me! I have plowed and gathered into barns, and no man could head me - and aint I a woman? I could work as much as any man ... and bear de lash as well - and aint I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried with a mothers grief, none but Jesus hear - and aint I a woman? (hooks Ain't I A Woman, 74)

It is perhaps one of the most salient articulations of DuBois' "double consciousness", of King's multiple jeopardies", of Hill Collins' "both/and", outsider-within. It speaks to Caraway's "riddle" and reality of black womanhood, and my own sense of crisis as a black woman in a liberal-humanist world view.

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71 See Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies" in Race Writing and Difference (ed.) Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Theories and feminisms of black female subjectivity need to operate at a number of levels. In the first instance, they need to take into consideration the multiple positions that the black female subject adopts in society. In other words, they cannot be static, fixed or given. They must needs be shifting, or at the very least, they must take as given a non-unified subject. Acknowledging a theoretical form that shifts might then result in a demystification of

> The community of language as a universal and unifying tool, one which totalizes and equals - in order to bring out along with the singularity of each person, the multiplicity of every person's possible identifications, the relativity of his or her symbolic as well as biological existence, according to the variation of his/her symbolic capacities; and in order to emphasize the responsibility which all will immediately face of putting this fluidity into play against the threats of death, which are unavoidable whenever an inside and an outside, a self and an other, one group and another are constituted. (Kristeva, "Women's Time" 35)

Here Kristeva acknowledges that placing the subject (him or her) on either side of a binary opposition results in *death*.

A black feminist epistemology must also take account of the black female subject as she has been constructed historically. Accusations of allegiances to the wrong groups or practices, or ethics, no longer have the same privileged currency when one theorizes beyond liberal humanist ideology. Arguably, the only conceivable allegiance will in the very first instance be to liberal humanist ideology and its universalist strategies, or to non-liberal humanist strategies which allow for a "life made up of both challenges and differences" (Kristeva, "Women's Time" 35). In short, a black feminist epistemology in itself should not consist of a formulaic code of practice, or set of ethics, that will reduce it and the black female to that which is always without contradiction. On the contrary, its very form will mean that there will be a constant proliferation of theories and ideas as soon as one begins to write and/or speak of the black female subject within liberal humanism. Thus, form must dictate content (subject matter), in order to interrogate the *lie* of liberal humanism which can only prescribe for the black female a discourse that acknowledges her by a series of negations, so that she is a *non-unitary* subject, a *shifting* self, who harbours a set of *multiple* consciousnesses. She is both/and, an outsider, who is nonetheless within. Liberal humanist language erases her so that she disappears with each word she utters, or with each utterance prescribed to her.

In the final section of Kenneth Clarke's essay, entitled "Who Speaks For The Negro?" Clarke argues that the multiple civil rights organisations which served the varying political interests of the black community need not be viewed as detrimental to the civil rights movement as a whole. He argues that "each organisation influences the

momentum and pace of the others."(131) Offering an alternative approach to viewing the multiple organisations he states:

> The civil right problems - the American racial problem - are historically and currently *complex and multidimensional*. Each approach has some validity and no one knows which is *more valid than others*. The ultimate test of *a given approach or patterns of approaches*, will be in the demonstration of observable and sustained changes in the status of Negroes - the evidence that Negroes are included in all aspects of American life ... This goal is not likely to be obtained by a single agency, method or leader. *Certain approaches will be more compatible with the temperament of some individuals. Negro and white. than with others.* (emphases added) (86)

I take the liberty of "playing" with Clarke's statement to argue thus (in the light of the preceding discussions):

> *Black female subjectivity* is historically and currently complex and multidimensional. Each *black female self/identity* has some validity and no one knows which is more valid than others. The ultimate test of a given approach or patterns of approaches will be in the demonstration of observable and sustained changes in the status of *black female subjectivity* - the evidence that *black women* are included in all aspects of American life ... Certain *black female selves* will be more compatible with the temperament of some individuals, Negro and white, than with others.

I have deliberately sought to "call into play the identity and/or language of the individual and the group". (Moi, Kristeva Reader, 295). For, as Kristeva argues,

> We must ... attack the very premise of this rationality and this society as well as the notion of a complete historical cycle, and dismantle them patiently and meticulously, starting with language and working right up to culture and institutions.... This ruthless and irreverent dismantling of the workings of discourse, thought, and existence, is therefore the work of the dissident. Such dissidence requires ceaseless analysis, vigilance and will to subversion. (Moi, Kristeva Reader 299)

There has been a refusal of theories of black female subjectivity and black feminist epistemology that speak to the need for solidarity of all black female subjects. Operating as another form of closure, discourses of solidarity and sisterhood, born out of so-called racial and gender oppression, do not have the same coinage and currency when not employed within a liberal humanist context, where common parlance deletes the other. Therefore those same discourses become redundant within the unending

parameters of a black feminist epistemology, which looks instead to theories that "give rise to a (liberal humanist) law that is overturned, violated and pluralized a law upheld only to allow a polyvalent, polylogical sense of play". (Moi, Kristeva Reader 295)

CHAPTER FOUR

THE COLOURED FEMALE BODY IN PERFORMANCE: AN ANALYSIS OF FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE/WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF

Introduction.

African-American theatre in the 1970s saw the emergence of an era of black revolutionary drama, in tandem with the Black Power movement, the civil rights movement and organisations from the 1950s onwards. If the 1940s-1950s saw the growth of African-American theatre companies such as the American Negro Theatre company, cited in Chapter Two, then the 1960s saw the increasing development of such movements. Black ensemble theatre companies flourished in the 1960s but due to lack of funding and grants, had mostly collapsed by the 1970s[1]. This period of revolutionary black drama, though short-lived, nevertheless foregrounded a form of black political combat "in the oldest traditional form of communal protestation and expression known to humanity: a vibrant theatre, a living, breathing Black Theatre." (Foreman 73). What continued to be prevalent was the desire of African-American male and female playwrights to voice Afrocentric concerns along with the feeling that black playwrights needed to be the vanguard of those who would "articulate a distinctive black aesthetic based on an appreciation of the educative and political purposes" of theatre (Keyssar, The Curtain And The Veil 208). The contributions of black male playwrights and directors of black theatre in the sixties and seventies is relatively well documented;[2] the work of the African-American women playwrights much less so, due in part perhaps, to the fact that black women playwrights, were few and far between and also because the multiple political complexities of the Black Power Movement meant that black women were not seen to be organising theatre

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1 See "The Negro Ensemble Company: A Transcendant Vision" in The Theater of Black Americans (Volume II) Ellen Foreman argues that even *with* funding from the government, African-American theatre companies such as the New Lafayette Theatre, established by Robert Macbeth in 1967 and Black Arts Repertory, established by Imamu Baraka in 1965 were only ever short-term theatrical projects. Foreman also offers a detailed analysis of the Negro Ensemble Company, established in 1968 by Douglas Turner Ward.. See also Dictionary of the Black Theatre 255-256, 238-239.

2 The contributions of Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, James Baldwin (whom, Hay notes, had a strong influence on the Baraka's writing (95)), Ossie Davis, Loften Mitchell, amongst others, to black (revolutionary) theatre are examined by:Harris and Davis, (eds.) Dictionary of Literary Biography: Volume Thirty-eight 22-61, 80-85, 208-213, 311-322; Hay, African-American Theatre 91-126, 106-112, Errol Hill (ed.) The Theater of Black Americans: Volume I 148-167; Loften Mitchell, Black Drama 183-225; Woll, Dictionary of the Black Theatre 224-226, 187-188, 191-192, 199-200, 236. This list is by no means exhaustive.

companies in the way that black men were.[3] That said, the work of African-American women *was* being produced both on and off-Broadway. As Brown-Guillory states in Their Place on Stage, while

> [e]arly mavericks often trod gently and spoke softly, these contemporary black women playwrights have lifted their voices in order to raise consciousness in this 'Theater of Struggle'.... Though each has her own brand of humor, wit and wrath, the messages are the same: African Americans must struggle together in order to make substantial social, political and economic gains. (74)

There was not a coterie of black women playwrights in the 1970s as there was in the 1920s. Socio-political changes of the 1960s and 1970s called for collective political action from African-Americans as is demonstrated in Chapter One. This often resulted in the marginalisation of black women's voices. Furthermore, collective theatre companies such as the Negro Ensemble Company meant that, plays by black men were more often than not given more artistic credence that those by women. In All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men But Some of Us are Brave (1982), the editors offer a detailed bibliography of "Black Women Playwrights from Grimke to Shange."(280-296) They list five African-American women playwrights after Alice Childress who was writing in the 1950s: Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy, Sonia Sanchez, Martie Charles and Ntozake Shange. Although these playwrights were writing during the 1960s and 1970s, not all of them achieved national recognition as playwrights. Martie Charles for example is listed as only having written three plays: Jamimma (1972), Black Cycle (1971) and Job Security (1970). The plays, which according to Hull *et al.* are written in the tradition of Black revolutionary didactic theatre, are not listed as having been performed publicly and neither does Woll in Dictionary of the Black Theatre make any mention of Charles. However, what unites these black playwrights is the fact that they continue a tradition of black female playwrights and seek to use the theatre in order to highlight black experiences from a specifically female and feminist perspective. Hull *et al.* note that

> [o]ften in plays by Black men, the happiness of black women or their 'completeness' in life depends upon strong Black men. In contrast, to white-authored dramas, where Black women have usually appeared as devoted servants to white families, as matriarchs, or as dumb, incompetent people, black women playwrights have told the Black woman's story - from slavery to freedom - from her point of view. (289)

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3 I attempt to tackle the problems of sexism further on in the chapter. My point here, however, is that black women playwrights were often part of ensembles, working as actors or playwrights. They were not the artistic or executive directors and therefore did not attract the same kind of attention for their efforts.

Writing from a black and female "point of view" does not, (as has been shown in Chapter Two) result in, or guarantee an open door to the theatrical establishment. While such plays have a crucial political and some might insist, moral value, the very nature of their moral and political agendas means that the plays do not always receive the same kind of critical appraisal as male and/or white-authored texts. There have been exceptions of course, such as Ntozake Shange's For Colored Girls. Before the success of For Colored Girls on and off-Broadway, however, Lorraine Hansberry set a precedent when she became the first black women to "write a successful Broadway play" (Woll 212). A Raisin in the Sun (1959) (hereafter Raisin) is a full-length naturalistic drama that explores the dreams of a black American family in the 1950s. Raisin won Hansberry the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Raisin, which was voted the best play of the 1958-1959 theatre season. The performance took place at the Ethel Barrymore theatre. On March 12 1959, The New York Times critic, Brooks Atkinson, described Raisin as an African-American version of The Cherry Orchard.[4] Focussing on the honesty of Hansberry's dramatic context, he concludes that the play as a whole "has vigor as well as veracity and is likely to destroy the complacency of anyone who sees it." (The New York Times vol. 1) The play ran for five hundred and thirty consecutive Broadway performances and was released as a film in 1961. The film version won a Cannes film festival award. In 1973, the musical version, Raisin was adapted by Hansberry's husband, Robert Nemiroff and composed by Judd Woldin. It opened on Broadway and ran for three years.[5]

Adrienne Kennedy's plays depart from Hansberry's well-made naturalistic dramas and tend towards the surreal and poetic. The majority of her dramatic texts are one-act plays which are "seemingly, autobiographical projections of her inner state, surreal fantasies based on the central character's problems with identity and self-knowledge" (Hull *et al.* 287) . Kennedy's most famous and successful play to date is Funnyhouse of a Negro (1962). The play deals with the complexities of blackness in a predominantly white society. In Funnyhouse, Sarah, the protagonist attempts to untangle and deal with interlocking gender and racial problems; problems that Shange will attempt to articulate some ten years later in For Colored Girls; namely, the dilemma of black female subjectivity in a predominantly white and male dominated society. Funnyhouse and her later play Cities in Bezique (1969) (the umbrella title for

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4 This comparison of Hansberry's text with Anton Chekhov's post-revolutionary Russian drama arises, presumably, because of the "well-made" nature of Raisin .

5 Hansberry died from cancer in 1965. Her second play, The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window did not achieve the success of Raisin. According to the Dictionary of Literary Biography 7, Sidney Brustein is less famous but more artistically pleasing 247-253. For a more detailed analysis of Hansberry's plays see But Some of Us Are Brave 285-287; The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual 267-284;

two short dramas entitled The Owl Answers and A Beast's Story) which also deals with the nature of fragmented identities won Kennedy an Obie award in 1963. With Kennedy's focus on multiple identities it is possible to see the beginnings of the shift away from the well-made play by African-American women playwrights towards a *form* that reflects the content of her plays, namely the issue of being black and female within a broader context that is dominated by white and/or patriarchal ideology. What begins to emerge in Kennedy and comes to fruition perhaps more "successfully" in Shange, "is a poet of theatre [who] does not deal in story, character, and event as a playwright. She deals in image, metaphor, essence and layers of consciousness" (Woll 45). Interestingly the producer of Cities in Bezique, Joseph Papp would later go on to produce For Colored Girls. Cities in Bezique ran for sixty-seven performances at the Public Theatre in January 1969. Perhaps not surprisingly the The New York Times critic Walter Kerr, felt that the fragmentary nature of the form left the audience with nothing to grasp. In Kennedy's work, identity he argued, "is like fall-out, drifting in on all winds." (The New York Times vol.1) The fuller implication, that of seeking to reflect at a formal level the dilemma of racial and gender differences that do not coincide with mainstream norms is missed by Kerr in this instance. Consequently the nature of Kennedy's theatre is misinterpreted. Thus in his review of January 19 1969 he states:

> [i]t is conceivable that this is a kind of theater and that by simply immersing ourselves in it, without asking rational questions of it or trying to force it into some other shape, we might find ourselves clothed by the rain of images, fed by the accumulating overlay.... If these two plays don't work - and I don't think they do - it is because we are always left just outside them, counting fragments that never quite fuse. Echoes reverberate, whirl about as leaves do at the edge of a storm; but nothing is drawn to a center, distilled, condensed to leave a residue. The raindrops are there but they are too far apart to make a rain, and we finally go away feeling rather as though we'd spent our evening studying the sound track of a film.

This is an interesting response. One could argue for the way in which it is actually a wholly positive criticism, if only because Kerr himself has found it necessary to adopt a critical vocabulary that attempts to grasp the nature of Kennedy's form. A *standard* critical response to black female realities as explicated by black female playwrights would be inappropriate because of the nature of the *form* and content of the play which deviates from a standard white and male *norm*. Consequently, the critic must *struggle*, since as a spectator he has entered what Brown-Guillory describes as a "Theater of Struggle", to comprehend the nature of the form and content before him. One could argue that as a white and male spectator, viewing the struggle (work, or ideas, or dramatic text, the terms could be synonymous here) by a black and female playwright, it is obvious that he will articulate, and in

articulating generalise (or universalise), the "we" who is "always left just outside" the "fragments" of an *other* reality. This tendency to totalise the nature of experiences is in itself problematic especially when one enters a mainstream liberal discourse. However, what is crucial is that in an attempt to *deal with* the performance as a whole, he must, as critic, enter into debate with the playwright and this he does in the review, by responding to poetry on stage, with poetic discourse in his criticism. What remains problematic is his call for a theatre that acknowledges a centre, a distillation, when the playwright is dealing with fragmentation, with dispersion. [6]

Sonia Sanchez hails from a different theatre tradition altogether. That said, Sanchez pre-figures Shange's linguistic devices - that of writing in the vernacular. Hull *et al.* describe Sanchez as "[t]he most representative of the Black revolutionary tradition" (288).[7] Black revolutionary drama, according to Hay, stems from a Duboisian philosophy of theatre. It is a philosophy that views the role of theatre as being first and foremost a political one. This form is agit-prop.[8] Sanchez is also a prolific poet who uses poetic form in her one-act plays "following closely the Black agit-prop method of short play forms, simplistic action and direct language, designed to convey the message of the play to black people as effectively as possible." (Hull *et al.* 288) Sanchez's plays can best be described as black moralities. They include The Bronx is Next (1970), Sister Son/ji (1972), Uh-Huh; but How Do It Free Us (1975), The Bronx is Next was first performed by Theatre Black in New York City. Sister Son/ji was performed at the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre in New York City. According to Woll, Sister Son/ji is Sanchez's most significant contribution to black theatre (247). The play deals with the education of blacks in a predominantly white society and also questions the nature of education as whole. As a fifty-year old woman reviews the early years of her life (through flashbacks) the audience sees her rejection of standard schooling in favour of the teachings of Malcolm X and a woman at a black power conference who "preached love and respect between black men and women" (Woll 247). The play also turns to examine the way in which the Black

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6 For a fuller assessment of Kennedy's playwriting see Woll, Dictionary of the Black Theatre 227-228; Hull *et al.*, But Some of Us Are Brave 287-288; Helene Keyssar, Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984) 109-112; Doris Abramson, Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 28-30, 279-283.

7 See Hay, African American Theatre who deals extensively with the black revolutionary theatre 96-127.

8 One could argue for the way in which black revolutionary theatre has a particularly male bias, stemming from Du Bois through to Amiri Baraka. Baraka was a leading proponent of black revolutionary theatre in the 1960s. Hay records 1965-1972 "as the most important aspect of the fourth period of Black Arts Theatre., the Era of Black Revolutionary Drama." (96). According to Hay, Baraka, after studying Yoruba and Islamic cultures sought to impose a fusion of the two ideologies on to black revolutionary theatre.

Power Movement itself was riven with gender inequalities, so that she herself is forced to endure and eventually "lose" a husband who becomes increasingly involved in the movement without her. She later loses her thirteen year old son when he is killed whilst fighting in the name of the revolution.

Sanchez's militant fervour and the fact that she is more widely read as a poet has meant that her dramatic works have not received the same attention and critical appraisal as that of Kennedy or Shange, for example. Nevertheless, her "abbreviated, slashed and fused words as well as ... irregular capitalisation and punctuation" (Woll 246) are poetic *marks* that resurface in Shange's choreopoem.

Taken together, one could argue that the poetic features adopted by Kennedy and Sanchez who both reject the standard well-made, full-length play, coalesce in, and are developed by Shange, in For Colored Girls, to greater critical acclaim. For Colored Girls was produced by Joseph Papp and the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1976. It "moved swiftly from West Coast workshop performance to ...[the] ... New Federal Theatre and uptown to the Public. A Broadway move to the Booth followed, with the show amassing a total of 867 performances (747 at the Booth) in New York City." (Woll 65)

According to Keyssar (1981) For Colored Girls as a choreopoem is "both historically and strategically an archetype in black drama" (211) Its archetypal nature rests on the fact that at base, the choreopoem enacts two major aesthetic and political tenets; firstly it refuses a Eurocentric aesthetic as the cultural hiatus of all artistic forms and secondly it challenges the "social values of middle-class America" (Keyssar, The Curtain and the Veil 211). Consequently it is possible to argue for the way in which Shange's choreopoem as a formal device in theatre is a product of its time insofar as it incorporates

> all that has been exciting and commanding in black drama and experimental theatre in the past fifty years. *For Colored Girls* fulfills the aspirations of a 'poor theater' as conceived by Jerzy Grotowski in the 1960s: It focuses on the movements and sounds of actors as persons while strongly de-emphasizing the customary theatrical supports of sets, costumes, lights, and elaborate blocking. The play asserts its genealogical debt to black drama in its sharp concentration on the inner lives of black people, its unhesitant use of colloquial, metaphoric black language, and its transparent, balanced structure, which at once calls forth a folk tradition while making the performance an extraordinary occasion. (Keyssar, The Curtain and the Veil 212)

Seen this way, the choreopoem was not such a radical departure from all that had gone before in black drama; it simply fused certain "black" aesthetic forms at the

level of language, music and dance along with a searing black feminist perspective at a time when these elements were already in use by other black women playwrights, such as those mentioned above. Just as importantly, the process of the choreopoem was political and one in keeping, to all intents and purposes, with a broader black politics of the time. Thus, although the choreopoem reached Broadway in the summer of 1976, the idea was conceived collectively in 1975 and continued to be in process until it reached Broadway. Thus Keyssar (1981) explains that:

> [i]t was begun ... as a series of seven poems ... *in conjunction with dance*; the author Ntozake Shange, and a dancer, Paula Moss, first performed the kernel of the play in dance studios and clubs in San Francisco. The two women next brought the show to New York, where they again performed in dance studios and bars. During this time, *four other women joined the company and Oz Scott took over the direction of the play from its author. For Colored Girls* was next performed as a *workshop showcase* at the Henry Street Theater and moved to the Public Theater in June 1976. (211) (emphases added)[9]

This collective and evolutionary process might be seen as symptomatic of the kinds of black political events that were occurring in ways both general and specific. Thus, in the conjunction between dancer and poet, one witnesses a desire to explore the black aesthetic in these two forms and in the gathering of other black women, one can speak of the collective political intent of African-American women of the time. The touring from San Francisco to Broadway might be seen as an example of the way in which a political vanguard of black women sought to mobilise others women of colour. Arguably the choreopoem as a form was inherently political in terms of the final product and the process because

> the evolution and success of the play were never a matter of high-visibility or sudden floods of financial support; instead ... 'Lines of folks and talk all over the Black and Latin community propelled us to the Public Theater'.[10]

In the introduction to For Colored Girls, Shange discusses the theatrical process that culminated in the performances both on and off-Broadway, and the way that both practical and theoretical explorations created a developing awareness of

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9 In the published version of For Colored Girls, there are twenty poems.

10 The New York Times theatre critics were unanimous in their view that For Colored Girls was an outstanding success. According to Woll, the choreopoem "charmed the critics and won an Obie for the author and a Tony for Trazana Beverly [Lady in Red]. Critics praised the close collaboration of Shange, the performers and the director Oz Scott." (65) For Colored Girls received three reviews from The New York Times:1975-1976 June 2 1976, 293; June 13 1976, 297; and September 16 1976, 326. Brown-Guillory notes that For Colored Girls "rocked Broadway and touched the lives of blacks like no other before it ... [it was] the second play by a black woman to reach Broadway ... [it] won a host of awards, including the Golden Apple, the Outer Critics Circle, the Mademoiselle, an Obie and an Audelco, and was nominated for the Tony, Grammy, and Emmy." (Their Place On Stage 40) The show toured London in 1977.

herself as an African-American woman.[11] Apart from studying dance, she also undertook a course in Women's Studies, "designed to make women's lives and dynamics familiar to us, such as: Women as Artist, Woman as Poet, Androgynous Myths in Literature, Women's Biography I & II; Third World Women Writers" (x).

This period of study offered Shange a theoretical foundation, for enabling her to create variants in her understanding of women and women's lives. The latter was not limited to the lives of African-American women, but women who Shange describes as "the mislaid, forgotten, &/or misunderstood women writers, painters, mothers, cowgirls & union leaders ... from Isis to Marie Laurencin, Zora Neale Hurston to Kathe Kollwitz, Anna May Wong to Calamity Jane." (Shange x) [12] The practical explorations in dance led Shange to identify and develop her sense of an African heritage so that while

> Women's Studies ... rooted me to an articulated female heritage and imperative, so dance, as explicated by Raymond Sawyer & Ed Mock insisted that everything African, everything halfway colloquial, a grimace, a strut, an arched back over a yawn, waz mine. (Shange xi)

Thus theoretical and political critiques of "Women" informed her physical explorations (through dance) of herself as a woman "in a colored woman's body" (Shange xi). For Colored Girls might thus be viewed as one of the end products of Shange's theoretical (intellectual) and material (dance/theatre) processes, it attempts to fuse feminist theory with dance and dramatic practice. The thematic elements form a part of on-going debates by a black woman about young black women living in the United States during the 1970s. The debates themselves are represented in a form - dance and theatre - that in varying ways speaks to the racial and gender concerns of the text. As Shange points out, studying African dance and rhythms gave to her and helped her to develop a consciousness that was specific to her as an African-American woman. Studying gender and racial issues in tandem with her practical explorations enabled her to create her own reality of being a black woman. The result was that "I moved what waz my unconscious knowledge of being in a colored woman's body to my known everydayness." (Shange xi) Through her body and the medium of dance, her "known everydayness" was thus developed, so that her body became a source of another discourse, a space where her developing theoretical ideas (previously unconscious knowledge), could be articulated.

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11 Helene Keyssar in Feminist Theatre 140-147 also discusses the play from conception to Broadway as well as offering a feminist reading of the choreopoem.

12 The use of & is Shange's own. Frequently she writes phonetically and uses abbreviated forms of language in order to challenge what she perceives as Eurocentric formal syntactical and linguistic structures.

This consciousness of the African-American body as a cultural entity with a history rooted in an Afrocentric tradition recalls Barbara Christian's (1980) observation about the black female slave transported to the New World who "must have been at a loss to determine what sexual behaviour meant to her master and mistress [since] dance, religion, song, music in the African world view are characteristically sensual because the body and soul are seen as one" (15). Brown-Guillory (1988) views For Colored Girls as an exemplary piece of African theatre precisely because it "is comprised of chants, poetry, dance rituals" (41).[13] For Christian, Brown-Guillory and Shange the African culture is viewed as one in which the body is not distinct or separate from religious, social and political discourses.

Rather than focussing on Shange as playwright and poet, I have deliberately chosen in this chapter to concentrate on her choreopoem For Colored Girls. There are a number of reasons for this appropriate to the thesis as a whole. Firstly, the choreopoem allows for an understanding of black female subjectivities and identities in contemporary society. Shange offers constructions of black female subjectivity that are both provocative and problematic, because, in her words, she wants other women of colour, "to have information that I did not have. I wanted to know what it is truthfully like to be a grown woman. All I had was a whole bunch of mythology-tales and outright lies."(Tate 162) The question that arises is, how does she perceive and choose to expose what she terms "the outright lies" (Tate 161) and also, what does she offer as alternatives to the lies. Secondly, acknowledging Hill Collins' (1991) suggestion that black feminist thought consists of "specialized knowledge created by black women's reality by those who live it" (22), it is necessary to look at the ways in which For Colored Girls privileges the experiences of the non-white female subject, as a normal and not a marginal or deviant experience, in order to offer a reality that speaks to the lives of women of colour. Thirdly, and as an adjunct to the second point above, I shall seek to examine the ways in which the playwright-poet mediates the creation of an outsider-within stance, that is "essential to black women's activism" (Collins 12), via the medium of theatre, before examining the reactions of black male scholars to the first performances of For Colored Girls on Broadway.

To begin with the discussion shall seek to examine the ways in which women of colour articulate the experience of being non-white in a predominantly white social

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13 This cultural recognition is further emphasised by the fact that Shange, whose name was Paulette Williams, adopted a Zulu name. Brown-Guillory suggests the name Ntozake (she who comes with her own things) Shange (who walks like a lion) helped Paulette Williams to redirect and empower her life in a more consciously Afrocentric way at a time when she was experiencing extreme emotional and mental anxiety (42-43). See also Tate, Black Women Writers at Work.

and political context, in order to examine what might be understood by experience, particularly when the experiential as a personal and political discourse forms the basis of black feminist discourses.

In her discussion of the re-emergence of black feminists and black feminist discourses, Nancie Caraway examines the way in which feminists of colour have become *de rigeur* at feminist conferences in the United States. Speaking more generally she questions why

> we sometimes create omniscent fantasies and mythic misperceptions of Black women? Why do Black women or other women of color sometimes become in our eyes, in white minds mysterious, possessors of magic and special truth? (109)

Quoting Trinh. T. Minh-ha[14] Caraway argues that the non-white feminist in attendance at feminist conferences with a largely white feminist contingent is "privileged to speak [and] encouraged to express her difference" (113). Consequently, she is accorded a privilege that requires her to speak and in speaking, to offer white delegates an image of herself that speaks to the nature of her difference.

It could be argued that that this desire by white feminists to hear in the words of feminists of colour the so-called truth of their differences, also speaks to the way in which the subject within liberal-humanist ideology is encouraged to define itself as the norm by contrasting itself to an other self. The norm in this instance does not only apply to a perception of white-ness or male-ness, but more importantly, to a perception of unity and wholeness of the self. If, as is demonstrated in Chapter Three, the guiding principle of liberal-humanist ideology is to make believe that subjecthood and the language of the subject are fixed and stable entities that gravitate towards a set of universal truths, then arguably there needs to be a mechanism in place that allows the individual subject to perceive what is normal, in terms of subjectivity, and what is not normal. In other words, the subject requires a set of criteria in order to know and understand his or her position within the liberal-humanist construction of reality. More to the point, it could be argued that implicit in the request for "authenticity" placed upon the black female subject(s) by white female subject(s), is the demand for a *particular* form of otherness - that of the black female - to affirm her difference and stand for all black women. In this instance, it is not just that the other has be unitary, but she has to be unitary in *particular* ways. The norm in this instance is white and female.

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14 Trinh T. Minh-ha is a cultural/feminist theorist and film-maker. Her most recent works include Framer Framed (New York: Routledge, 1992) When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 1991).

Bearing in mind the hypothesis that liberal-humanist ideology defines itself as the norm, experiences of difference, or otherness must be framed holistically. Difference finds its place within a binary oppositional scheme in order for an effective process of comparison to take place. Caraway for example argues that "the woman of color ... must be authentic against white standards of who is and who is not "authentic". Minh-ha must paint herself thick with authenticity" (113). In actuality, demands for authenticity only assure the onlooker of the genuine and trustworthy nature of the subject at a superficial level. Thus Minh-ha is only "authentic" from the subjective position of "white standards" which are secured within a liberal-humanist schema.

Peggy Phelan (1993) develops a similar argument *vis-à-vis* the identity of the subject and the on-looker. With reference to psychoanalysis, she argues that the "danger in staking all on representation is that one gains only re-presentation" (10). According to Phelan, the eye which sees is not a physiologically perfect organ - "the human eye is physiologically falsifying" (14), and is not dissimilar to the "I", which is psychically impoverished. As a consequence of this, "visual representation makes ever more elaborate promises to deliver a satisfying, a substantial real" (15).

Minh-ha's representation of herself as a woman of colour within liberal-humanist ideology might also be viewed in terms of an interactive process, one that entails Minh-ha giving an image (representation) of herself, in response to the call for authentic otherness. There are a number of other features that characterise the process Firstly, a visible, or as Phelan suggests a "marked" instance (the instance within the binary oppositional scheme that is seen to have value - "the male is marked with value; the female is unmarked" (5)). Secondly, an invisible, or "unmarked" instance. Thirdly the real (representation) and finally the unreal representation. Minh-ha , who in the context of the conference, is the "unmarked" instance, offers an apparently *real* representation of her difference, so that the "marked" group might be better able to define itself.

However, given Phelan's view that the "eye" is not accurate in its perception and J W Scott's (1992) assertion that in any case "experience is at once always already an interpretation [that] is ... neither self-evident nor straightforward" (37), one could argue, like Phelan, for the ways in which there are radical possibilities involved in remaining "unmarked", because remaining "unmarked" gives the other the opportunity to resist inclusion in collectivising or totalising frameworks by allowing the unmarked to *select* aspects of herself for representation. This could be viewed as a strategy in which the other deliberately defies notions of authentic or true experiences

by strategically offering identities or representations which (deliberately/knowingly) do not conform to perceived notions of difference. This would serve to destabilise that which is perceived as the norm. To paraphrase Phelan, being able to acknowledge the limitations of the "visible real" could lead to ways of "redesigning the representational real" (3).

This performance of representation or re-presentation appears to be both politically assertive and personally invigorating, because it might at least allow the "unmarked" to challenge cultural hegemonic discourses and a mainstream ideology that speaks in limited and limiting ways about a subject not in process but in stasis.

I Performing Metaphysical Dilemmas

For Colored Girls offers sets of experiences that by liberal-humanist norms are unmarked. The central theme on which the choreopoem is developed, is Shange's assertion that "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma" (45). Like Deborah King and Patricia Hill Collins, Shange's statement foregrounds the non-white and female subject as embodying differences which - when taken as a whole - result in socio-political and psycho-historical dilemmas. In other words, the black and female subject is ontologically a contradiction within what I have defined as liberal humanist ideology.

Aside from deliberating the metaphysical dilemmas in the content of the poems, Shange also uses form to reflect the major thematic concerns. Although the twenty poems are parts of the whole choreopoem, they are, for the most part, complete narratives in themselves. Consequently, as a whole they do not work to convey an exposition or complication in a linear and logical design. The poems touch on, or *capture*, aspects of "colored" girlhood and womanhood in a fragmented fashion. Where one might discern a linear narrrative is in the development or ordering of the entire dramatic narrative, which progresses from adolescence to motherhood. That said, the poem entitled "toussaint", which deals with the childhood fantasy of an eight-year old girl, who discovers Toussaint L'Ouverture in the 'ADULT READING ROOM' disrupts that progression slightly.

The dramatic narratives, which attempt to demonstrate the metaphysical dilemma of colouredness and femaleness seem to foreground both "universal" and specifically "black" concerns which overlap at points in the narratives. These overlaps are not in every instance, easy to separate, highlighting the problems of attempting to

define and/or separate racial, from gender oppression/concerns. According to Brown-Guillory however, For Colored Girls "became recognizable as universal" insofar as it is "for women world-wide who need to know that they are not alone in suffering (41). In this instance, poems such as "abortion cycle #1" might be viewed as "universal", because it attempts to relate the trauma of being "pregnant & shamed" (Shange 23), and also, the ways in which the female body and mind experiences abortion in the de-personalised setting of the operating theatre. Thus, the lady in blue speaks of "tubes table white washed windows/ ... /legs spread/anxious/eyes crawling up on me/ ... metal hoses gnawing my womb/ ... /bones shattered like soft ice-cream cones. (22) Similarly "latent rapists", which articulates the fear of being raped by "men who know us", addresses a general black and white female/feminist concern as opposed to specifically black female concerns. However, the point of overlap occurs when the Chorus of women infer that the men they are referring to are black. Other moments in the choreopoem attempt to address or foreground specifically black and female concerns and for this reason, For Colored Girls might be viewed as a seminal African-American dramatic text of the 1970s because while it acknowledges the wide-spread oppression of women, it also foregrounds the particular ways in which black women and women of colour experience that oppression. Thus the Coloured female *body*, through the medium of dance (specifically *African-influenced* dance forms), which is a characteristically non-white mode of physical expression, is privileged as much as dialogue and/or monologue. Reference to black musicians, such as Charlie Parker, Martha and the Vandellas, Smokey Robinson, The Dells, to name a few, situate the choreopoem around an Afrocentric as opposed to a Eurocentric view of women's oppression.

Given Hill Collins' assertion that black feminist theories are constructed out of black women's realities, it would be tempting to view For Colored Girls as an autobiographical choreopoem, which speaks to realities of black womanhood as experienced by Shange. This view, however, would be as problematic as asserting that the text deals solely with the universal oppression of all women. It might therefore be more illuminating to view the choreopoem in either one or all of three ways. Firstly, given Brown-Guillory's view that Shange's decision to adopt an African name might have empowered her to re-focus a mentally and emotionally traumatised life (42), the choreopoem might be viewed as an attempt by Shange to emancipate herself as a black woman artist, particularly in a society in which, Shange argues, "I felt trapped, and I felt parodied and ridiculed and exploited" (Tate 173).[15] Secondly,

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15 Brown-Guillory's view *vis-à-vis* Shange's change of name might be criticised on the grounds that her reasoning is individualising, psychologising and pathologizing. Tate fails to consider the fact that Shange may have been *deliberately* employing a political and social strategy.

one could see the choreopeom as a series of mini-narratives, complete in themselves, which create only a fragment of an autobiography of women's - particularly Coloured women's - oppression. Finally, one could view the choreopoem as selected fragments of every woman's experience of different forms of oppression. This is not to homogenise the nature of female oppression but to acknowledge that while, as Lorde argues, female oppression knows no ethnic bounds, the narratives in For Colored Girls are written in acknowledgement of the ways in which a given set of women - that is Coloured women - deal with gender oppression. For Colored Girls, then, is not only a black feminist exploration of the oppression faced by women of colour; it also offers an example of the ways in which a black feminism can be partly defined by its autobiographical content. Just as Hill Collins insists that black feminist thought is diverse and contradictory (19), so For Colored Girls presents diversity and contradiction, in order to foreground the inherent dilemmas that come with being female and Colored.

Again it is important to state my position in relation to the choreopoem before offering it as a representation of oppression as experienced by women of colour. As a black woman, how I perceive dance as a form, and my body in relation to my *self*, and to dance, may well affect how I read the theatrical text/performance. Also, my gender and racial identity will affect the degree to which I respond to the thematic concerns of the choreopoem. A female subject differently positioned with regard to the body for example, might not view For Colored Girls as liberating in quite the same ways as myself.

In his essay on Maya Angelou's use of what he perceives as the autobiographical statement, Selwyn Cudjoe attempts a re-definition of autobiography and authentic experience as written by African-American women writers.[16] He argues that the African-American autobiography is neither "excessive subjectivism" nor "mindless egotism" but rather, a genre that reflects a "much more impersonal condition" (7). Furthermore, he argues that the autobiographical subject "emerges as an almost random member of the group, selected to tell his or her tale" (9).[17] Cudjoe's subject of autobiography becomes the medium through which the experiences of the group are articulated. Given this explanation, Shange as the poet writes not merely of her own experiences as a black woman which might result (in terms of the subject matter) in what Cudjoe describes as "me-ism" (10). Rather, her mode of recounting Colouredness and femaleness results in "our-ism" (10).

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16 Selwyn R Cudjoe, "Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement", in Black Women Writers. 6-24.

17 I would question the degree to which this process of selection is random. Selection of one subject will inevitably result in the exclusion of other specific and/or random instances.

In the light of the previous chapter, which rejects the notion of universal sets of experiences which accord to the subject the sense of "I", one could argue that Cudjoe's autobiographical subject is also engaged in universalising sets of experiences which, though marginal to mainstream white patriarchal reality, nevertheless seek to offer as truths alternative experiences, thus precluding the possibility of further differences within the realm of otherness. This is indeed a possibility. However, the difference in this instance lies in the fact that Shange, rather than offering For Colored Girls as a (fixed) reality experienced by all girls and women of colour, looks to shift or reveal what she perceives as "the lies" in order to present variants of truths and realities by which to understand experiences that exceed so-called norms. One example might be the way in which the Coloured narrators name and define their own experiences in order to define themselves in relation, or in opposition to what might be perceived as normal. The young adolescent, for example, who celebrates losing her virginity "in the backseat of that ol buick" (10), rejects the scorn of the *lady in blue* who questions disbelievingly: "you gave it up in a buick?/ ... some niggah sweating all over you?" (11).[18]

For Colored Girls works to disrupt the notion of normal or universal experiences and iterates instead what Cudjoe terms "the unique weight of the personal", so that the autobiography becomes a "means of expressing the intensity with which Afro-Americans experience their violation and denigration" (9). Privileging the subject and self through an experiential discourse, becomes an actualisation of personal experience into a political statement. Autobiography, employed in this way, is not only political, but radical insofar as it gives space to a personal set of experiences and ideas, and concurrently destabilises the notion of a common and given set of assumptions which are in any case always ideologically implicated. The autobiographical statement then allows for experiences which are "uniquely personal" to also be viewed as the experiences (historically related or otherwise) not of one individual, but possibly of generations of black women, because it is written "as a public rather than a private gesture ... and superficial concerns about *individual subject* usually give way to the *collective subjection* of the group" (Cudjoe 10).

In a working paper presented at theWarwick University Women and Theatre Conference (1990), I argued that "[t]he only way the reader/spectator can identify a woman is by her coloured costume since none of the narrators are developed in a psychological sense. Instead, the seven women are seen severally as female

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18 This narrative also demonstrates Shange's need to give to young girls what she describes as vital information. See Tate, Black Women Writers at Work (162).

experiences in colour. They become, in a wider sense: coloured experiences."[19] This statement, which I have since developed, might be seen to correspond to the idea that the black female subject is shifting and multiple in contrast to the liberal-humanist subject who, as already explained, moves towards a sense of self that is unified and static. Viewing an individual dancer severally or multifariously as opposed to singularly means that it becomes difficult to align certain sets of experiences to one woman of colour, because she shifts from poem (experience) to poem, refusing definition from a singular events however joyous or traumatic.[20] Gabriele Griffin (1993) describes it as an "ability to change roles [that] indicates the possibility of change *per se*" (37). In other words, the Coloured women are shaped by, but need not necessarily be psychologically defined or confined by, the roles that they adopt. This is also reflected at the level of the performance in which the performer rejects a development of characterisation that is born out of a set of psychological *truths* and opts instead to recreate the self, that is the performing body, from one moment to the next. This process towards characterisation is one that was adopted by the Wooster Group[21]. In a discussion of the Wooster Group's production of Nayatt School (1978), David Savran (1986) describes the way in which "the performers work from an instrumental rather than a psychological basis.[22] They never become the characters they play, remaining simply the medium used to produce them".

In a similar way, Shange's Coloured women, through the media of dance and poetry, become instrumental to/for the narratives that they perform. If, as Griffin suggests, For Colored Girls utilises "movement, instability, the subject in process ... as form and content", it might be feasible to argue that this theatrical convention is in some ways allied to the experience of Coloured women's reality within a liberal-humanist society. For Savran, Wooster Group performers "resist reductions to a psychological essence [and become] dancers in the choreography of displacement"

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19 An untitled working paper examining For Colored Girls in the light of Kristevan semiotics and *écriture féminine* as espoused by Hélène Cixous, Warwick University, Coventry, May 1990. A re-Worked and extended version of the paper was presented at the Women's Studies network Conference, Coventry Polytechnic, Coventry, July 1990.

20 The temporality of a role is not necessarily specific to Shange's choreopoem. Variations of this theatrical device have been in common practice since the early twentieth-century. Bertolt Brecht's concept of "*verfremdung*" or the "*V-Effekt*" (an alienation technique for the actor), Ronald Gray, Brecht the Dramatist (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1979) 67-88; see also John Willett (ed. and tran.) Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978).

21 An American performance group, directed by such notables as Richard Schechner. The Wooster Group were perhaps most noted for their notorious production of Arthur Miller's The Crucible which they performed in blackface in 1983.

22 David Savran, Breaking The Rules (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986) (114). Nayatt School formed part of the Rhode Island Trilogy of plays. Future page references to this text will follow the citation.

(115). This I think is not dissimilar to Shange's Coloured women who "become ... coloured experiences" rather than inhabiting a psychologically defined experience, one that requires the performer to be *a* consistent and consistently coloured set of experiences.

It might be easier to identify this difference in performance between *becoming* and *being* if instead of privileging and foregrounding the Coloured women as human(ist) subjects who communicate the *real* meaning, or the point of the choreopoem,[23] one sees the experiences (mini-narratives) as ideas or moments which simply require theatricalisation with recourse not to a psychological memory, but to a performance or *theatrical memory*. In "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff" (hereafter "somebody"), for example, the *lady in green* narrates the experience of giving up aspects of herself to "a lover/i made too much room for" (51). The experience or idea of having one's person pared down by a man "whose ego walked round like Rodan's [*sic*] shadow" (51), only belongs to the *lady in green* for as long as she becomes the instrument necessary to communicate the narrative, or for as long as she becomes the body that communicates the language (emotional and/or political and/or dramatic and so on) of "somebody". Thereafter the *lady in green* remains open to performing other ideas (or she remains open to theatricalise other experiences), without the remnants of psychological or emotional abuse from previous narratives.

Savran describes this as a "pattern in which the performer does not "sacrifice subjectivity" but instead "goes through the motions" (15). Arguably the seven Coloured female performers/narrators/dancers are bodies that perform or theatricalise multifarious experiences or phases of Coloured womanhood, rather than being seven Coloured women who have collective experiences to choreograph and shape into a substantial autobiography. The body however does not become a storehouse of emotions. Instead one might argue for the way in which Shange's performing bodies become cognizant with a spectrum of emotions which allow them to engage with any of the narratives without recourse to a psychological memory that has experienced the welter of emotions in a "real" sense.

Since the seven bodies then, must re-invent or create themselves with each narrative they encounter, and since they are not concerned with consistency between narratives, or logical progression of the narrative structure of the choreopoem as a whole, a re-invention of the self with each new narrative must be accompanied by a destruction or rejection of the former self. The *lady in red* for example dances and

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23 Shange refuses to work to the idea of creating "a point" in her work. She argues that For Colored Girls "is not an issue play. It is an exploration. All my work is just an exploration of peoples' lives. So there isn't any point. Black writers have a right to do this". (Tate 171)

narrates "one", in which she desires to be "a memory/a wound to every man" (32). She fashions a twilight world in which her body and its adornments become a regular ritual, one which culminates in a night with a man. Built into the ritual however is the 4.30am request for the man to leave and the tears she cries when he has left.

Here the *lady in red plays* (in the sense of pretending) or *becomes* a sad lonely isolated woman, caught in the cleft between the need for independence and the need to be needed. In "a nite with beau willie brown" (hereafter "beau willie"), the *lady in red* plays a spirited and strident mother of two young children who is repeatedly physically abused. Apart from the theme of interpersonal relations, which characterises most of the poems,[24] there is little to suggest that the *lady in red* who performs "one" is the same lady in red that performs "beau willie". For Griffin, this shifting body speaks to the way in which "the young black woman is not fixed in a role in the same way that the performers are not. She can move on, change" (38). For Savran, the process towards this shifting body "necessitates a destruction of identity [because] it can only produce a secondary meaning by evacuating the old" (115). The Coloured female body becomes a polysemantic site in which meaning - and the meaning of the meanings produced - is proliferated and shifting as opposed to static and fixed.

This indeterminacy is also evident as regards the setting and space of For Colored Girls. Although the stage space is bare, designed only by the costumed bodies and lights, all the women define themselves as being outside various American cities. The *lady in brown* in outside Chicago, the *lady in yellow* outside Detroit, the *lady in purple* outside Houston (6,) and so on. This geographical positioning of the self, which situates the women in an undefined social and performance (playing) arena might be seen to represent their desire to commune as women of colour in an imaginary space where they act out their own text, without the confines of dominant male and/or white hierarchies which relegate them and their autobiographical premises to a peripheral status. Thus when the *lady in brown* says "i'm outside chicago", she acknowledges at once that she is and is not a part of the (*brown*) community of Chicago.

As each of the women names herself as "outside of ... " they effectively loosen the bonds or ties of their identity, so that they remain unnamed and unplaced. Another way of interpreting the outside position is to view the displacement that the women effect as Shange's need to re-define the theatre space, making it more open to the

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24 For example "graduation nite", "sorry", "pyramid", "no more love poems #1", "no more love poems #2", no more love poems #3", no more love poems #4".

shifting body, so that the more outside the seven women are, the less defined they are geographically and in terms of the theatre setting, even though, paradoxically, they *are* centralised, relative to the spectator, once they take up their positions on stage.

If the body is foregrounded as instrumental to a specific text, not simply because the form is that of dance but because conventional modes of performance along with unities of subjective self, time, place action and so on are suspended then the theatre space must also undergo literal, theatrical and metaphorical revisions. By situating themselves at a geographical remove from their communities, the women of colour metaphorise distance from the "real" world and offer themselves to be seen in different ways in a non-real world - before the spectator. The statement "i'm outside chicago" is a request for the spectator to suspend disbelief and to imagine a space that is not defined as such,[25] but nevertheless exists as the backdrop to the specific mini-narratives and choreopoem as a whole. If the women are geographically distanced from their own communities, to an outside region, then the theatrical space functions as an (literally) inside location, one in which the spectator is situated at a fixed remove from the shifting bodies that define their own terms of existence and survival and transgress notions of fixed roles and identities for Coloured women.

This somewhat complex shifting of the subject(s)' geographical location could be seen as a reflection of the problematic position of black women within mainstream society and goes some way towards elucidating King's "multiple jeopardies" and Hill Collins' "peculiar sensations". In the light of For Colored Girls, Hill Collins' theory of the outsider-within gains clarity. It is a contradictory or indeterminate position within society's frameworks, generated by: Black women's ability to perceive the interests and concerns of the "marked group which in many instances contradicts and/or impinges on their own interests as the "unmarked" group. The shift to outside might be viewed as both a political and a strategic manoeuvre because it empowers the Coloured women in the choreopoem to effect changes without continuous recourse to dominant groups and the attendant ideologies. The women possess a unique angle of vision, and can become their own tools for change/emancipation, because as Coloured bodies they dance at the intersection of two conflicting realities; the first being the society in which they choose to move outside of. The second reality entails a recognition of the fact that their racial and gender configuration results in their being "unmarked" - a status that Phelan argues is a potentially radical status.

That the Coloured women are outside the various North American places from the beginning of the choreopeom establishes a partial framework within which to read

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25 Rather like the Chorus speech at the beginning of Shakespeare's King Henry V.

the whole. For Colored Girls is not concerned to resolve necessarily black women's metaphysical dilemma, rather to expose it as a lived reality. What the choreopoem does expose are the ways in which Coloured womanhood is rather like the shifting Coloured bodies, a subjecthood in perpetual process.[26] What the Coloured bodies demonstrate through the course of the choreopoem are the ways in which the Coloured female body negotiates or *strategizes* with body, language and theatrical process, in order to resist (re-)presenting debilitating negative stereotypical images which deny the possibility of change. Thus the women are shown *owning* their desires as in the case of "one", where the *lady in red* narrates and becomes the woman who adorns and "displays" her body in a ritual of self-desire and/or self-love: "she always wore her stomach out/lined with small irridescent feathers/ ... /the pastel ivy drawn on her shoulders/to be brushed with lips and fingers/smelling of honey and jack daniels .../she glittered honestly. (32) The lady in orange, on the other hand, challenges the sexist language and representation of black women, and refuses to be defined by others' discourses. She reserves the right to be as she chooses. Thus she argues:

> ever since i realized there waz someone callt/a colored girl an evil woman a bitch or a slag/i been trying not to be that & leave bitterness in somebody else's cup/ ... /this is a requium [*sic*] for myself/ ... /cuz i had convinced myself colored girls had no right to sorrow/& i lived & loved that way & kept sorry on the curb/allegedly for you/but i know i did it for myself. (42-43)

They are outsiders *within* liberal-humanist structures of oppression, refusing fixity and stagnation, and outsiders *within* a theatrical space and setting that they have individually and collectively redefined; a space onto which they project bodies that refuse to be - as the lady in orange says - "sorry and colored at the same time" (43).

This could well be seen as another important element of black feminisms. It suggests that on a day-to-day basis the black woman as shifting subject begins to formulate her own strategies for change. This is in keeping with Hill Collins who argues for an experiential discourse that informs the theorising of black feminisms.

By situating the Coloured outside, Shange is also acknowledging Colored woman as "outsiders" who are nonetheless defined by mainstream ideology. She challenges the notion that black women have only outsider status by foregrounding the struggles and strategies that the Coloured women engage with in order to

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26 This is demonstrated formally by the theatrical process described previously; a process that Savran articulates as an "exposure of femininity" (115). This is not to sentimentalise or over-complicate either the form of the choreopoem or the content. It is however an acknowledgement of the fact that the racial, gender and cultural differences in the performance are not always represented as other realities existing on margins far removed from the centre of ideological frameworks.

overcome forms of internalised and external oppression. Thus while the *lady in orange* refuses to be sorry for being Coloured, the Chorus of Coloured bodies refuse the apologies of those men who exploit and/or abuse them, by parodying them and refusing their well-worn excuses. Thus:

> *lady in blue*: that niggah will be back tomorrow, sayin 'i'm sorry'
>
> *lady in brown*: no this one is it, 'o baby, ya know i waz high, i'm sorry'
>
> *lady in purple*: 'i'm only human, and inadequacy is what makes us human, & if we was perfect, we wdnt have nothin to strive for, so you might as well go on and forgive me pretty baby, cause i'm sorry'
>
> *lady in blue*: i got sorry greeting me at my front door/you can keep yrs/i dont know what to do wit em ... /didnt nobody stop using my tears to wash cars/cuz a sorry ... i let sorry/didnt meanta/& how cd i know abt that take a walk ... /i'm gonna do exactly want i want to & i wont be sorry for none of it/ ... i'm not going to be nice/i will raise my voice (52-53)

It may be inappropriate in the last decade of the twentieth century to speak of black women as outsiders or other when in actuality they work within and are defined by the parameters of mainstream ideology in both Britain and the United Stated. It is precisely because the women in For Colored Girls *are* within these parameters that they can recognise their unequal status within the dominant structure. One cannot be absolutely outside of mainstream ideology (in the manner of opting out of the system) because it is not an option. Instead, positions are adopted which allow the subject to perceive herself as within or outside of (to varying degrees) mainstream social frameworks. As bell hooks (1984) argues

> black women['s] ... lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege (however relative within the existing system). It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and *make us* of this perspective to criticise the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony. (From Margin to Center 15) (emphases added).

The crucial point continues to be the fact that the outsider-within must continually *strategize* or negotiate around her position in order to move beyond debilitating or negative impositions which define her as a marginalised and therefore powerless instance.

For Colored Girls might also be seen as a celebration of the black female body. It works to reclaim the body of the black female subject in response to the ways in which it has been historically inscribed and/or named by non-black and/or male

subjects. Tate describes how "Shange works from the anger she feels at the roles forced upon black women by American society" (149). In the same interview with Tate Shange maintains

> I feel that as an artist my job is to appreciate the differences among my women. We're usually just thrown together, like "tits and ass", or a good cook, or how we can really "f---". Our personalities and distinctions are lost (153).[27]

The reference to "we" as "tits and ass" etc., is of course a reference to the stereotypical images of black women that were perpetuated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[28] Christian (1980) consolidates Shange's view that black women are negatively defined by what is perceived as their sexual prowess. She points to the stereotype of the "lewd" and "impure" black female slave, the "loose woman [who] craved sex inordinately" (13). What Shange seeks to do is to challenge and undermine these racist and sexist representations of black women, not by simply re-presenting diametrically opposed images of black women, but by foregrounding ways in which the women can and do shift/dance between identities, in order to offer varying representations of Coloured womanhood and the Coloured body. Thus she does not deny the existence of sexual, desiring black women, but offers a representation of that desire and/or sexuality as she perceives it. Both "sechita" and "one" foreground the Coloured body as a site of independence.

"sechita" is a portrait of a dance-hall girl, and "one" a narrative depicting a night in the life of a woman who seduces men for her own pleasure. In both poems, the bodies of the women form the central image, and perhaps more importantly, the body becomes the focus of their own desire. In "one" the woman is "hot/a deliberate coquette/who never did without/what she wanted/ and she wanted to be unforgettable" (32). Just as Shange describes how she herself re-discovered and accepted the ethnicity of her "thighs and backside" (xi), so she creates black women who within the confines of their *profession* seek to re-assert their right to define their own bodies. This self-definition for the sake of self-(re)assertion is a form of rebellion against dominant cultural representations of the Coloured body that is not unproblematic for

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27 Shange is referring here solely to black women. Further on in the interview she points out: "I would never have a white person in a story I wrote with the possible exception of 'the white girl' [Spell#7] piece. I have no reason to do it" (172).

28 Clearly, white women are also subject to this type of sexist stereotyping. However, Shange's reference is in line with Gilman's argument in which he argues that the eighteenth and nineteenth-century black woman was depicted as the Hottentot Venus. He maintains that this stereotypical representation resulted in the fetishization of black women's sexual organs quote. He argues: "Sarah Bartmann's sexual parts, her genitalia and her buttocks, serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth-century ... detailed presentation of the sexual parts of the black, dominates all medical description of the black, dominates all medical description during the nineteenth-century." (Gates, 235).

black women. Interestingly, similar strategies have been employed by white women with different and altogether more positive results. bell hooks (1992) demonstrates the varying receptions to white female sexual agency, as compared to black female sexual agency and makes a distinction between "acts of resistance that transform [and those that] seduce" (164). In her discussion of white American pop singer Madonna and her "flaunting of sexual experience", along with her desire to appropriate blackness as a sign of "radical chic", she insists that

> The vast majority of black women in the United States, more concerned with projecting images of respectability than with the idea of female sexual agency and transgression, do not feel we have the 'freedom' to act in rebellious ways in regards to sexuality without being punished ... Mainstream culture always reads the black female body as sign of sexual experience (160).

"One" depicts a "reglar colored girl", who ritualistically transforms herself in order to seduce "men to whom/she wanted to be memory/a wound" (32). The cool arrogance, and studied confidence which she possesses at the beginning of the poem give way at the end to a woman who, having dismissed her male companion

> wd gather her tinsel &/ jewels from the tub/ & laugh gayly or vengeful/ ... /and when she finished writin/ the account of her exploit in a diary/ embroidered with lillies and moonstones/ she placed the rose behind her ear/& cried herself to sleep (35).

This ending serves to nullify the bravado of the woman who

> straddled on pillows and began 'you'll have to go now/i've a lot of work to do/& i cant with a man around/her are yr pants there's coffee on the stove/its been very nice/but i cant see you again/you got what you came for/didnt you' (34).

There are two levels of performance here; the ritualized seduction that the narrative demands and the performance by the Coloured body (the *lady in red*) depicting black women as sexually promiscuous in a the way described above. Thus as opposed to over-throwing stereotypical notions of black female sexuality, the ritual, and the Coloured body that performs the ritual, re-affirm those same images. In acknowledgement of this, Shange signals her awareness of this dual problematic however, by *anticipating* the response of the black male reader/spectator: & now she stood a/reglar colored girl/fulla the same malice/livid indifference as a sistah/worn from supportin a wd be hornplayer or waitin by the window." (35) Thus Shange is able to counter black male responses to the protagonist by anticipating (their stereo-) typical attitudes to black women who choose define interpersonal relationships on their own terms.

Shange's portrayal of an independent black woman whose confidence "was the wrath/of women in windows/fingerin shades/of lace curtains" (32) and who at the same time "camoflaged/despair and stretch marks" will always be a problematic image to celebrate, because of the historically determined images of black women that were constructed during slavery. These continue, according to bell hooks, to have some coinage in contemporary society, resulting in the "predominant image [of the black woman] as 'fallen woman', ... whore ... slut ... prostitute. (hooks, Ain't I A Woman 52).

A conflict thus ensues between the historically determined images and identities of black womanhood and contemporary re-writings. Even the most determined and affirmative re-definitions and images, crafted by Coloured women of Coloured women will always contain strands of a history written through the dominant (historical) discourse. That said, it is possible to argue for the way in which the outsider-within, characterised by multiple subjective positions, is inevitably a radical position.

Mae G Henderson, for example, argues for the way in which black women's writing gives rise to "an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of the self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity".[29] For Henderson, black female writing (which she terms self-inscription) is by nature radical because it requires "disruption, re-reading, and rewriting the conventional and canonical stories, as well as revising the generic forms that convey these stories (156). Furthermore, she refuses the notion that dominant ideology subsumes black female "self-inscription" and argues instead that

> [t]hrough ... interventionist, intertextual and revisioning activity, black women writers enter into dialogue with the discourses of the other(s). Disruption - the initial response to hegemonic and ambiguously (non) hegemonic discourse - and revision ... together suggest a model for reading black female ... expression. (156)

In view of Henderson's argument, it could be argued that "one" and "sechita" are theatrical and narrative strategies which enter into dialogue with those discourse that might relegate "black female expression" to peripheral status. At the same time, the poems also seek to *strategize* with and around dominant ideological constructions of identity so that a reading of "one" does not privilege the image of black womanhood as always and already sexualised, but instead examines ways in which the Coloured body is self-fashioned or re-created in order to subvert prevailing sexist

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29 Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogues, Dialectics , and the Black Women Writer's Literary Tradition" in Feminists Theorize the Political (146) 144-166.

and racist images of black women. This is clearly perceptible in all of the dramatic narratives which work daringly within images of the sexually available black woman. However, instead of focussing on the women as being *acted upon* sexually, the poems centralise the female characters in order to foreground the ways in which they are the protagonists of their own daily performances, either as dance-hall girl, or sexually independent woman. In other words, both women are shown to be taking responsibility, within the given confines of their socio-economic setting, for their own lives. Seen from this angle, the Coloured body that dances and narrates "one" is less the victim of her own emotional needs and desires. The poem is too complex, at the level of thematic concerns, to focus solely on the way "she cried herself to sleep". The ritualistic preparation of the body, which involves the delight that "she waz desired", the 4.30AM ritual: "of dark musk oil egyptian crystals/& florida water to remove his smell" (33), exist side by side with her tearful sleep. It is perhaps tempting to focus on the sad plight of the woman who at the end of the narrative is alone and (therefore) tearful, but even this is of her choosing and, despite the anger of the man who recognises that he has been acted upon for her convenience and pleasure, the poem makes it clear that this is a danger that she chooses to flirt with on a regular basis.

Shange presents conflict of desires, although the full nature of the desire is not made overt. There is the desire of the Coloured body in recognition of itself. A body that is ritualistically adorned with "orange butterflies and aqua sequins/ ... silk roses/(32). There is also the shameless desire to have "tactful suitors/ ... experience her body and spirit" (33), contrasted with the need or desire to express herself as an autonomous woman who "cdnt possibly wake up/ with a strange man in my bed" (34). These desires conflict with whatever induces her to cry herself to sleep once the man has left. Shange embraces these contradictions, so that the female protagonist is never working to only one desire, or one set of desires, but a multiplicity of desires which conflict. The reader/spectator is witness to contrasting and conflicting desires of a consciousness that expresses and understands the need to be physically and sexually unrestrained. At the same time, the poet acknowledges the ways in which such desires are inextricably bound up with prevailing representations of the black female slave/subject. Perhaps it is for this reason that she cries herself to sleep.

There are similarities between "one" and "sechita", although the latter focuses more on the adornment of sechita's body. The narrative frames sechita in an image that looks to the ways in which black women can reconstruct and redefine their self images. In "sechita" Shange creates not conflicting desires, but a black woman in the image of an Egyptian queen (whom Shange describes as a goddess), in order to demonstrate the ways in which self-transformation and self-determination can result

in redirecting and determining the nature of one's life. Hooks (1993) expresses it in the following way: "[W]e have to be about the business of inventing all manner of images and representations that show us the way we want to be and are" (83).

Sechita's "business" involves transforming herself in order to counter a life that has left her feeling as if "god seemed to be wipin his/feet in her face" (24). The entire narrative requires that the Coloured body becomes engrossed in a transformative process. Here process becomes the actualising event, rather than the final product; through the ritualized process of "spreading oil on her cheeks", waxing her eyebrows, drinking neat whisky, she becomes the body that can masquerade in front of the "redneck" spectators. Again, as with "one" there are multiple layers of performance, or masquerade being acted out in this mini-narrative. There is the performance that the narrative describes - the performance that sechita enacts for herself, in order to become transformed into what she wants to be. Then there is the performance to the spectators in the narrative itself - for this she effects a striking entrance: "sechita's legs slashed/furiously thru the cracker nite/ ... /kicked viciously thru the nite/catchin stars tween her toes" (25). The performance of "sechita" is enacted by the Coloured body, which in this instance is the *lady in purple*. For now she will, to quote Savran, "go through the motions" (114) of transformation and masquerade for a "real" audience. The blurring of the distinctions between transformation in private (such as the dressing room) and transforming the Coloured body in public (for the spectator) is a powerful demonstration of the ways in which Shange encourages black women to *direct* their own lives. As Griffin says of For Colored Girls: "[a]ctivity is demanded at every level: of the text, of the performers, of the reader. Only activity promotes change" (36).

Rather than dwelling on a life that made sechita long for St Louis where "the dirt ... didnt crawl from the earth into yr soul" (24), Shange draws attention to the ways in which sechita affords herself spiritual protection as she approaches the stage. Thus: "she made her face immobile/she made her face like nefertiti/approachin her own tomb" (24). She becomes her own source of strength. It is also possible to perceive a ritualistic or theatrical death being enacted here because of the way in which sechita is likened to Nefertiti approaching her tomb. It could be viewed metaphorically as the death of her "ordinary" self, the vulnerable self that would not be able to confront the "red neck whoops n slappin on the back" (24). This is perhaps necessary, in order that the dance-hall girl might be metaphorically resurrected and allowed to *come into play*.

Aligning sechita to Nefertiti also links the Coloured female body to the African queens of classical antiquity, and recalls an age when African women *were* self-determining and self-governing.[30] It also makes a direct correlation between the contemporary black woman and her ancient forbears. Thus the dance-hall girl re-invents herself in the image of an African ancestral queen. This strategy speaks again to the imaginative and creative strategies that the Coloured bodies in performance and by implication perhaps Coloured women employ on a daily, almost ritualistic basis. Such strategies, which are not always evident (Shange privileges the audience to be witnesses to a detailed transformative process of which they would normally be ignorant), are inaccessible to those who do not live according to a sense of the self as shifting and/or proliferated, as having to re-invent the self from moment to moment.

It would be inaccurate to argue that, the black women in For Colored Girls divine themselves as goddess or queens of the ancient African world in order to endure the oppressions of a daily life that relegates them to an inferior status. Instead, "sechita" might be understood as a metaphor for the ways in which black women look to strategies for survival that transcend the everyday. Those strategies may well involve the recognition and use of an Afrocentric position, or discourse, that *rememories* for the black woman a different womanhood, but either way, it is a strategy for self-expression and self-determination. Sechita recognises the fact that she needs to survive not just materially, but spiritually. Her body then becomes the means through which to ensure both her physical and spiritual welfare. As Shange argues:

> We do not have to refer continually to European art as the standard. That's absolutely absurd and racist, and I won't participate in that utter lie. My work is one of the few ways I can preserve the elements of our culture that need to be remembered and absolutely revered (Tate 164)

This statement is borne out in "sechita", which examines the need to *rememory* other histories and realities. In order to develop ways of gaining empowerment. In keeping with Cudjoe's analysis of African-American autobiography, what both "sechita and "one" work towards is the "creative organisation of ideas and situations [thus] generating that which is purposeful and significant for our liberation" (Alibhai-Brown 35). That this form of liberation may be strewn with problems is not denied or ignored in For Colored Girls, but taken on board as part of the Coloured body's metaphysical dilemma. In registering contradictions Shange reveals the lies which she believes are an accompaniment of racist and sexist ideologies, lies which deny black

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30 See David Sweetman, Women Leaders in African History (London: Heinemann 1984).

women the right to a history and images of the black female self that are not bound up with white and male hegemonic discourses.

II The Colored Body as a Site of Radical Potential

In her essay "Writing The Body", which explores the writing of Joan Riley, Grace Nichols and Ntozake Shange, Griffin observes that the body in the writings of white middle class women "is still very much taboo", so that "[t]he world of white middle class women's fiction thus presents the fiction of a mind without a body or of mind which dominates the body" (Griffin 25).

The *lady in blue*, speaking as one of Shange's colored women, offers a more confrontational assessment of this observation. In a poem entitled "no more live poems #3", she argues

> we deal wit emotion too much/so why dont we go on ahead & be white then/& make everthin dry and abstract wit no rhythm and no reelin for sheer sensual pleasure/yes let's go on & be white/ ... /lets think our way outta feelin/lets abstract ourselves ... (44)

One of the prime ways in which For Colored Girls addresses the coloured girls for whom it is written, is through a discourse of the body that is not concerned to deny its existence. In contrast to the fiction that Griffin describes, For Colored Girls starts from the point of the black female body, so that the reader/spectator of the performance is witness to a body which articulates itself - via the medium of dance - with references to black historical and contemporary discourses. As dancers, the Coloured women deliberately look to move from a tradition that reifies rational thought at the expense of the body. In "The Silence and The Song" Barbara Omolade argues that "[t]he ways of knowing which have developed in the West betray an obsession with rational thought; an inability to connect body, mind, and spirit".(285)

The self-directed processes of self-representation and expression in "sechita" and "one" are presented as deliberate strategies in an attempt to out-manoeuvre and counter negative images of the black female body. The Coloured female body is thus presented as engaged in processes of change that are continuous. It is therefore not only at the level of interpersonal relationships that Shange's Coloured women engage with the body. As she points out :"I'm trying to change the idea of seeing emotions

and intellect as distinct faculties" (Tate 156).[31] As dancers, the women's bodies are perpetually in play, or performance, signifying perhaps a recognition of the way that black women have been described as connecting up to life.

Because of the ways in which the body is acknowledged as a part of daily existences, the performers are required, like the narratives, to possess a powerful sense of themselves as Coloured women, that is to say, they carry an inordinate amount of what can only adequately be termed as self-knowledge. Self-knowledge, as opposed to self-consciousness, because the latter implies degrees of discomfort and/or unease. Self-knowledge however, would seem to imply a less anxious and more holistic sense of self. It could also serve to include an awareness of the black female self as constructed both historically and ideologically. Seen this way, a sense of self-knowledge is crucial to the Coloured women because without it they are unable to effect the necessary socio-political changes that are required to disrupt oppressive mainstream hegemonic discourses.

"Graduation nite", narrated by the *lady in yellow*, is an adolescent account of early sexual encounters and the movement from high school "to whatever was out there" (7). The narrator who describes herself as "the only virgin in the crowd" demonstrates an ambiguous nature, one that might be seen as characteristic of the outsider-within. The ambiguity arises because of her lucid and humorous assessment of herself as virgin, relative to her older female acquaintances who offer themselves to be seen as sexually active. The *lady in yellow* who becomes the adolescent narrator thus shifts between two roles and consequently, mutually exclusive, or contradictory discourses. In the first instance, she is the *woman* (outsider), commenting with ironic detachment (and perhaps *rememorying* for herself) adolescent sexual desire and anticipation. Thus she describes a moment during the graduation party: "seems like sheila and marguerite was afraid/to get their hair turnin back/so they up against the wall/lookin almost sexy/didnt wanna sweat." (8) Similarly, she (the *woman* in yellow as narrator) is able to observe that she "hadda make like my hips waz into some business/that way everybody thot whoever waz gettin it/was a older man cdnt run the streets wit youngster." (9) In direct contrast to this however, the young *girl* (in yellow, simultaneously the woman in yellow) complicates, or makes ambivalent the observations of the woman observer when she states: "i got drunk & cdnt figure out who hand waz on my thigh/but it didnt matter/cuz these cousins martin eddie sammy

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31 It needs to be remembered that for Shange, the emotions and the body are themselves not distinct. As I have already pointed out, Griffin observes that Shange's Coloured women have bodies which are flooded with emotion.

jerome & bobby/was my sweethearts alternately since the seventh grade/& everbody knew i always started crying if somebody actually tried to take advantage of me." (8)

The use of "i" makes it difficult to ascertain when the commentary is spoken by the *woman* and when it is spoken by the young *girl*. This might be viewed as a deliberate attempt to unsettle any simplified and/or given notions of black female adolescent sexuality. More importantly however, it serves as a multiple discourse for "the little girls who are coming of age" (Tate 162), in contradistinction to discourses of adolescent sexuality that are based purely on "contraceptive information" and/or "outright lies" (Tate 162). Shange argues "[p]erhaps there's not much you can do if you've been raised to be virginal and to believe that this great thing is going to happen to you on your wedding night. But I don't want them [young girls] to grow up in a void of misogynous lies. I want them to know that they are not alone and that we adult women thought and continue to think about them. (Tate 162) In the light of this statement, it seems feasible to view the *lady in yellow* as Shange's attempt to offer "young colored girls" an ironic commentary on the world of pubescent teenage bravado. One that is nevertheless informed by "adult" versions of so-called experience and/or reality.

Challenging the void of misogynous lies also entails bringing the body into play in a way that defies and challenges the accepted norms and restriction. The problem once again is that this transgression may well be interpreted as stereotypical, leading to a misunderstanding of the other, or of the others' different relation to the body.

The self-knowledge of the women in not limited to an awareness of themselves as sexual beings, however. Just as the women offer a critique of the ways in which their identities have been wrought socio-historically, so too do they discuss with ironic detachment the ways in which their lovers have acceded to patriarchal structures of domination. Their analyses are not limited to white mainstream culture, but to any and/or all groups and structures of oppression which betray their contempt of the Coloured femaleness, when the Coloured women are within their own communities Perhaps a need to critique black manhood also contributes here. In view of the narratives that deal with interpersonal relations between black men and women one can understand the desire to effect a (geographical) distance in order to voice and direct an uncensored attack against a category of men which, according to Shange, the critics refuse to believe exists.[32]

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32 Shange in the interview with Tate describes how male critics have refused to acknowledge the brutal natures of some of the black men she created in her work. "A man was interviewing me

Eight of the twenty poems deal directly with the socio-sexual and emotional dynamics between the sexes. These poems tread a dangerous line in terms of the politics of black solidarity, an area that will be discussed more fully towards the end of the chapter. The danger resides in the fact that the Coloured women dare to challenge publicly the sexist behaviour and attitudes of black men in angry and mocking tones. In doing so, they belie the racial solidarity and racial pride that is often wrongly perceived as transcending sexist oppression.[33]

In "Acknowledging Differences" Nellie McKay discusses the dilemma that black women face, should they choose to speak out against black men. Referring to a case in the United States, which involved a black woman, Anita Hill testifying against Justice Clarence Thomas, "the newest member of the Supreme Court", for sexual harassment, she considers the anxiety that the affair caused her as a black feminist with a profound understanding of "the conspiracy of silence Black women in this country have held for a long time to protect them from white racists and keep peace their Black brothers." (270) McKay summarises the delicacy of the situation when she writes that:

> [e]very black feminist listening or watching the proceedings through those three dreadful days and nights, believing that Anita Hill was telling the truth, and despising Clarence Thomas for his part in the drama, was fully aware of the complication of the politics of race and gender (276).

Referring to the attitudes of her own father and by implication to the older black generation who lived through a racially segregated American society, she attempts a retrospective analysis and concludes that

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for *The New York Times* ... He told me he had never raped anybody. My response was 'You know, every man I meet who wants to talk about rape always wants to talk about how he never did it? ... If you didn't do it, does that mean it didn't happen.'"(159)

33 This is an area of contention dealt with by a number of black feminist scholars. See for example Nellie Kay, "Acknowledging Differences: Can Women find Unity Through Diversity", in Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism Of Black women (ed.) Stanlie M James and Abena P A Busia (New York. Routledge, 1993) (267-283). Future references to this volume will follow the citation. McKay argues that "[w]hile Black and white women had difficult relations because of white women's racism, the complexities they experience at the conjunction of race and sex are considerably greater. Black women cannot choose between their commitment to feminism and the struggle with their men for racial justice" (277); see also Michele Wallace, Black Macho And The Myth of Superwoman. Here Wallace discusses in rather scathing terms the problems black women faced when forced to ally themselves to the fight against race oppression at the expense of sexist oppression (160-174); Audre Lorde "Sexism: An American Disease In Blackface", in Sister Outsider 60-65.

> [m]y proud, conservative, now dead father would have been appalled beyond belief that a decent, educated young Black woman agreed to stand up in public and accuse Clarence Thomas of such unspeakable behavior ... my father would also have been ashamed of Anita Hill or his daughters if either *dared to speak publicly of sexual harassment by* a *Black man, even if he knew that accusation were true. He would have believed that the racial damage in such an act far outweighed the gender good.*(269, emphases added)

In the light of For Colored Girls, the metaphysical dilemma that for Shange characterises Colouredness and femaleness is nowhere more apparent than in this debate between racist oppression by the white culture and sexist oppression by the masculine black culture. The daring which McKay speaks of in reference to Anita Hill is also true of Shange who dares to address the issue of sexual violence which she perceives as a betrayal by black men, of black women. In her understanding that to be "Black and female is to be faced with a special quality of violence and violation" (Evans 15),[34] she is caught in McKay's "complication of the politics of race and gender" if she opts to expose that complication to an audience of blacks and whites. And here lies the dilemma. If she acquiesces to the complications that work to silence certain experiences, then she colludes with the lies that she stridently and ardently seeks to reveal. Conversely, if she refuses the censorship and reveals the lies of, for example, patriarchal/sexist domination, by black men then she alienates herself from the black community and from those who refuse to acknowledge the conflicts that ensue in the arena of race and gender politics.

The Coloured women of the choreopoem transgress the ideological, political and racial boundaries, when they discuss the male "friends" who are "sufferin from latent rapist bravado" (19). These "friends", the women insist, are "men friends of ours/who smile nice/stay employed/and take us out to dinner" (19).

"Latent rapists", deals solely with the black male as rapist and just as earlier, the analysis of "sechita" and "one" led one to perceive the dangers of stereotyping black female sexuality, in "latent rapist" the narrators could well be viewed as offering a positive confirmation of the myth of the black rapist, which to quote Angela Davis, "continues to carry out the insidious work of racist ideology" (183). Yet perhaps typically, for every gesture that condemns the black woman for *telling on* black men, there is an oppositional stance that acknowledges the fact that

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34 hooks iterates a similar statement when she observes that "[s]ince so many black women have experienced traumatic physical abuse, we come to sexuality wounded." (Sisters Of The Yam 125).

> throughout the history of this country (USA), Black women have manifested a collective consciousness of their sexual victimization. They have also understood that they could not adequately resist the sexual abuses they suffered without simultaneously attacking the fraudulent rape charge as a pretext for lynching (Davis 183).

In other words, historically speaking, black women have been caught between the need to expose and resist sexual and physical violation, concurrently with naming and opposing the ideology that constructed an image of the black male as rapist. The contradiction or dilemma that manifests itself in "latent rapist" is precisely that of naming the black man as rapist. Sadly the truth of the situation, as McKay notes, does not enter into the equation. Instead, what takes precedence is the image of the black woman sanctioning and colluding with white patriarchal discourses of power. This, however, is a false and unsound reasoning. As is shown in "latent rapist", the colored women are opposed to the betrayal of black men, and choose to commune with each other, as opposed to colluding with the white community against, them. The following exchange between the colored women, is an example of their uncompromising analysis which exposes their dubious relations with some black men It also demonstrates Shange's refusal "to be a part of [the] conspiracy of silence" (Tate 159).[35]

lady in red a rapist is always to be a stranger to be *legitimate* someone you never saw a man wit obvious problems

lady in red but if you've been seen in public with him ...

lady in blue pressin charges will be as hard as keepin yr legs closed while five fools try to run a train on you

lady in red these men friends of ours who smile nice ...

lady in purple lock the door behind you

lady in blue wit fist in face to fuck

lady in red who make elaborate mediterranean dinners/& let the art ensemble carry all ethical burdens/while they invite a coupla friends over to have you/.../women relinquish all personal rights in the presence of a man/who apparently cd be considered a rapist

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35 More importantly perhaps, it details what in much feminist analysis has been indicated for a long time, and is not specific to the black communities, namely that rape is likely to be committed by people one knows and that women tend to stand accused of inciting it.

lady in purple especially if he has been considered a friend

lady in blue & is no less worthy of bein beat within an inch of his life/bein publicly ridiculed/havin two fists shoved up his ass ... (17-20)

The indignation and moral outrage this exchange would precipitate in advocates of black solidarity (at the expense of "the gender good") would be in response to the labelling of black men as potential rapists and also to the treatment that the women perceive as befitting the black male rapist, which, in this instance is not dissimilar to the treatment that black men were in danger of being exposed to at the hands of lynch mobs who instituted lynching as a "post-war strategy of racist terror" (Davis 184).

The ramifications for black women are unending. It means that they are always in the precarious situation of having to prioritise either a black self, or a female self. In other words, she is required to make a hierarchy of the discreet elements which characterize her in order to be acceptable but, as McKay insists, "[b]lack women cannot choose between their commitment to feminism and the struggle with their men for racial justice" (276). It is perhaps for this reason that the Coloured women in For Colored Girls shift from moment to moment as opposed to align themselves with absolute certainty to any given moment - emotionally, politically or socially.

For Colored Girls is not only concerned with the dilemmas of the single and independent Coloured female, but also with the mother, the woman who is emotionally involved with the father of her children. "A nite with beau willie brown" portrays the lengths to which a Coloured woman goes in order to defend her right to be *both/and*, black and female. It is a poem that articulates, perhaps more clearly than the others, the *interlocking* nature of ideological structures of oppression.

Briefly, "beau willie", narrated by the *lady in red*, is a dramatic monologue about crystal, a young woman of twenty-two and beau willie brown, the father of her two children, who is depicted as a violent, shiftless, crazy "niggah". Crystal leaves him, taking out a court order, allowing beau willie brown only restricted access to the children. In a final desperate attempt to "be a man", he goes to crystal and insists that she marry him. When she refuses, he holds both children out of a fifth floor window, insisting that she "say to alla the neigbours/ you gonna marry me" (60). The poem culminates with crystal saying: "but i cd only whisper/& he dropped em" (60).

In this penultimate poem, Shange is offering another view of black female reality. On one level, the poem is a feminist critique of a masculinity constructed through patriarchal ideology. More importantly however, it is an assessment of mainstream ideology, from the outsider-within position. As she systematically *annihilates* the character of beau willie, Shange also reveals the ways in which he is inextricably trapped by society's notion of what manhood, or masculinity, is and entails for the male constructed through its ideology. An adjunct to this is that crystal and willie, as part of the lower class black community, are doomed to subsist on the poverty line, with only welfare cheques and/or (Vietnam) veterans' benefits, which, it appears, would be easier to have if beau willie was legally married to crystal. Yet despite this, Shange does not portray crystal as a victim of her circumstances, but as someone who makes choices (or *strategizes*), even while she is denied material choice because of her low socio-economic status. Thus the crystal who is frequently physically assaulted by beau willie is also able to:

> burst out laughin/hollering whatcha wanna marry me for now/so I can support yr ass/or come sit wit ya when they lock yr behind up/cause they gonna come for ya/ ya goddamn lunatic ... /o no i wdnt marry yr pitiful black ass for notin and she went to bed (56-7).

While this does not liberate her from oppresssive material and personal circumstances, it does within the confines of her life seem to demonstrate her determination to free herself from the man she rightly perceives as a lunatic. In this, she demonstrates that her sense of self as a black woman with a multiple set of class, race and gender jeopardies, is stronger than her sense of self as a victim to both her violent lover and society's racist/sexist institutions, and a martyr to the cause of racial politics and solidarity. Thus when crystal "only whispers" that she will marry beau willie, she commits the most radical act of self defence and self actualisation in the choreopeom. Firstly, she effectively assists in the murder of the children, for had she agreed to marry beau willie, she might have saved the children's lives, albeit at the cost of sacrificing her own to a life of repeated brutality and denigration.[36] In this, she is not dissimilar to Cissie in Shirley Graham's It's Morning, Sethe in Beloved and

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36 Of course one could quite simply argue that gripped by terror the most she could do under the circumstances was whisper, or that whether she whispered or bellowed he would have dropped them anyway. However, with regards to the latter, this is unlikely. beau willie is determined from the outset to marry her so that he can claim veterans' benefits. His desperation to be materially stable and to be seen as a "real man" outweighs his homicidal tendencies. Secondly, bearing in mind that up until this point in the choreopoem the Coloured women are seen making choices which are not always consistent with "sensible" decision making, it would seem reasonable to assume that in this instance, crystal also makes a choice which results in the death of her children.

Margaret Garner. Secondly, in refusing to marry him, she denies beau willie his role as provider and mythical head of the household, a status he desperately requires, in order for his sense of "bein a man", to be reconstituted. Thirdly, in refusing to marry him, she denies him the right to degrade her physically. Fourthly, in taking out a court order against beau willie, so denying him access to his children, she condones the state powers which, around the time that For Colored Girls was written, viewed the black family as *pathological* and the black man as an inadequate patriarchal male figure, because he was being usurped from his rightful position as provider by the black female.[37] Finally, in writing about beau willie, Shange once again places herself and the Coloured women in the precarious position of metaphorically dancing on black men's graves. Yet it could be viewed as an inevitable result of making choices and choosing positions which do not conform to the societal notion of cultural and/or racial solidarity and cohesion. In making uncompromising choices which then expose ideological contradictions, Shange rejects the debilitating status of the victim.

The poem shifts between willie's version of his reality and the narrator's perception and attitudes towards the facts. Thus for beau willie who "tried to get veterans benefits to go to school" (56) it was the teachers who held him back and relegated him to the remedial class, so "he got himself a gypsy cab to drive" (56). But as the *lady in red* points out, "he cdnt read wortha damn" (56). Similarly, beau willie's notion of "that lil ol fight they had" is the same fight that the narrator says "almost killed crystal" (57). It is crystal who is shown to take responsibility for her actions in a way that projects beau willie's helplessness and hopelessness into sharp relief. Thus, when "crystal went and got pregnant again/beau willie most beat her to death ... /she still gotta scar under her tit where he cut her up/ still crystal went right on and had the baby" (56).

There are then two very distinct analyses which Shange foregrounds in the poem about "beau willie". Firstly, she draws attention to the plight of the lower class black community as a whole and the near impossibility or difficulty of breaking out of the ghetto existence. Thus, first and foremost, beau willie is a victim of the society which on the one hand exonerates his violence and frustration in the name of a somewhat questionable manhood, while simultaneously denying him access to becoming a "real man". As an unemployed illiterate black man, he is unable to

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37 Such as the infamous Moynihan report of 1965 for example. A host of scholars comment on, or critique, the controversial Moynihan including, Roll Jordan Roll: The World The Slave Made (450); Joyce Ladner, Tomorrow's Tomorrow a sociological study which seeks to challenge the Moynihan report on the grounds that he used white middle-class families and material conditions as the criteria for assessing black lower class families; Michele Wallace Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman 109-116; Angela Davis, Women Race and Class 3-4; bell hooks, Ain't I A Woman 71-82.

maintain his children and himself. The longer he remains unemployed the more unemployable he becomes. His attempt to return to the institution of education is a failure because due to his misplaced masculine pride he refuses to accept that he can neither read nor write.

Alongside the analysis of the society which taunts beau willie is the Coloured women's perception of the contradictions. While Shange does not imbue crystal with the qualities of an intellectually informed feminist - that would be a falsification of that reality - she does depict crystal as a woman who is able to resist and reject the pressures of what she perceives as a false and socially constructed idyll - the family - to confront the ignorant beau willie. Once again the black woman is shown to be shifting between an awareness of herself as part of the black community, at the base of the social hierarchy, *and* an awareness of herself as an independent black woman who rejects all forms of physical violence and denigration whether perpetrated by black or white men. As Shange explained: [I] have to live around people like him. I can't live around a whole bunch of lies. There are enough lies around as it is. I cannot sustain lies (158). This is important. In asking why Shange had to "tell on" as in expose or give beau willie away, Tate understands and recognises that Shange broke the unwritten rule, that of publicly testifying against black male abuse.

It is perhaps no surprise to discover that the end result of making choices and testimonies which reveal the inconsistencies in mainstream and malestream ideology leads to a ferocious backlash, a confirmation that the distinctive perspective accompanying an outsider-within position will always be in danger of being distorted, denounced and/or silenced.

> Shange, the black men said, was a goddamn traitor to the race. In a time when black men were striving for respect, here comes some middle-class, light-skinned bitch, putting black men down before the eyes of the white world. Resentment was also expressed over Shange's quick rise to fame - off of a bullshit nothing ass recitation of some fucking, man-hating poems! Nothing but a rip-off. That's all it was the men said. (Hernton 199)[38]

Calvin Hernton describes and analyses reports and critiques which likened For Colored Girls to "that classic pro-Klu Klux Klan achievement of 1915, Birth of A Nation!"(200) and saw it as a "degrading treatment of the black male ... a mockery of the black family" (200). The objections of black male critics were a response to Shange's particular version of a black and female reality.

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38 Michelle Wallace suffered a similar fate for her book Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman. See the introduction, to the 1990 edition in which she offers an *apologia* for her book which was first published in 1978.

Insofar as the poet's version, or vision did not coincide with the black and male perception, an ideological battle ensued based on where either one or the other was positioned when speaking and offering versions of the truth. As stated earlier in reference to McKay's essay on the Hill/Thomas case, the delicate and complex balance between race and gender relations can force the black woman into silence, if she privileges either race or gender politics over the other. Alternatively, she is literally exiled if she refuses to align herself to race politics at the expense of gender politics. Thus

> [t]he mobilisation against ... Shange ... was quick and solid. It came from all sectors of the black population: the press, the literary and scholarly journals and magazines, on black and white college campuses, and in the ghettos as well" (Hernton 200).

Hernton concludes that Shange was duly *punished* for her misdemeanour by being invalidated as "writer, scholar and put down as a black woman" (200), primarily because such writing was seen as "divisive" to the cohesion of the black community and "counter-productive to the historical goal of the Black struggle". (201)

In drawing attention to the blow that For Colored Girls had dealt their egos, the male critics, who commented on the choreopeom in the mid-seventies when it was first performed, missed the importance of the choreopoem as dramatic text and performance. In the rush to defend their masculine positions of authority, they failed to acknowledge the struggles of black womanhood. They overlooked the minutiae which spoke to the unresolvable conflicts engendered in blackness and femaleness and focussed instead on the damage it supposedly did to the Black struggle. The difference here is quite clear - the black men perceived a single black power struggle and movement, but For Colored Girls is predicated on more complex assumptions, the main one being that black women must necessarily engage in a struggle that is *both* racially *and* gender based, because of the ways in which they are subject to *both* racial *and* gender tyranny. Yet despite Hernton's assertion that

> when black women write about incest, rape and sexual violence committed by black men against black females of all ages, and when black women write that black men are castrators and oppressors of black women, black men accuse them of sowing seeds of "division" in the black community (202),

the Coloured women dancers refuse to be apologists for the positions they adopt. Thus Griffin states that, "depressing though several of these poems are, especially `a nite with beau willie brown', *For Colored Girls* is not predominantly concerned with victimisation but with finding the young black woman's voice and self" (34). In "sorry" and "no more love poems #1-4", the Coloured women refuse the apologist

attitude that accompanies guilt. Thus the women banter wittily about their refusal to accept the excuses and apologies for masculine domination and insensitivity:

> *lady in blue* that niggah will come back tomorrow, sayin 'i'm sorry'
>
> *lady in yellow* get this, last week my ol man came in sayin, i don't know how she got yr number baby.i'm sorry ...
>
> *lady in green*` shut up bitch. i told you i waz sorry'
>
> *lady in orange* no this one is it, 'i do ya like i do ya cause i thot ya could take it, now i'm sorry' (51-2).

If the *lady in blue* recognises the fact that "one thing I don't need is any more apologies" (53), it is because, as the *lady in orange* (danced and performed by Shange herself) says, "i cdnt stand bein sorry and colored at the same time/its so redundant in the modern world" (43).

The final moments of the choreopoem recall an ancient practice of healing the soul.[39] In "a laying on of hands", the women commune in their outsider space to offer a collective female and spiritual rejuvenation of the seven Coloured bodies. This return to what is often seen as an African tradition is in keeping with Shange's need to fuse Afrocentric forms and/or practices into the mainstay of the Coloured women's lives. One interpretation might allow that the "making me whole" that the *lady in purple* characterizes as an element that she misses describes the perpetual conflicts and schisms that they play and/or dance out. The desire for wholeness might refer to the need for a sense of wholeness not of a single self, but of several discreet selves. Thus Colouredness/blackness is just one way of being, as femaleness, is also a way of being.

> The laying on of hands recalls the opening poem and the request to :
>
> sing a black girl's song/bring her out to know herself/ ... sing her rhythms ... /sing her song of life/ ... she doesnt know the sound/of her own voice/her infinite beauty ... /sing her sights/sing the song of her possibilities../let her be born (4-5).

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39 See Joanne V Gabbin, "A Laying On Of Hands", in Wild Women In The Whirlwind 246-263. Gabbin defines the act of laying on of hands as "an ancient practice of using hands in a symbolical act of blessing, healing and ordination. By its very act it appears to bestow some gift ... it is associated with the healing power of Christ ... [o]thers see the practice as central to the African concept that the body and spirit are one." 247

By the end of the choreopoem, the women in a collective response to the metaphysical dilemma discover their own song: *[a]ll the ladies repeat to themselves softly the lines 'i found god in myself & i loved her'. It soon becomes a song of joy.* (63) Rather than viewing this as a homologizing of their experiences and differences as Coloured women, or as a call for monotheism, one might also see each woman as having discovered her own god, or (partial) solution to her experience of the metaphysical dilemma, along with the acknowledgement that experiences cannot be given the same voice or articulation by women and/or people of colour either *intra*- or transculturally.

Shange's seven women of colour are shifting subjects, or put differently, the choreopoem is about Shange's recognition of herself as being able to proliferate her identity. The metaphysical dilemma she describes is predicated on and aggravated by the fact that mainstream ideology refuses implicitly the *both/and* shifting stance which constitutes for Shange blackness and femaleness. Consequently that same ideology refuses, or rather negates, the black female subject, ontologically speaking.

Arguably, the black male critics who took exception to For Coloured Girls were not only attacking the themes of the choreopeom. They were also rejecting the alternative ideology of the shifting subject and those women who can and indeed do choose to speak an alternative set of truths and realities from that position.[40] The extreme and, one can only surmise, irrational response to For Colored Girls, the authority with which the feminine and the feminist realities of the women were aligned with the Klu Klux Klan's Birth of A Nation, points not only to the potential power of the shifting subject to be a disruptive and critical influence, but highlights the anxiety and desperate gestures of macho bravado, in the guise of scholarly criticism, by those who see themselves made impotent by a "gaggle of black female writers" (Hernton 200). It also exposes with startling alacrity their need to reinforce, at all costs, the notion of a unified (black) male identity and subjectivity within mainstream liberal ideology. The irony is that in actuality black male critics bonded

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40 In arguing thus, I argue *for* the radical, if ambiguous nature of the shifting subject from a theoretical perspective. Hernton, on the other hand offers a simpler explanation and suggests that "[t]he resentful emotions that black men feel toward black women writers are due to four unprecendented eventuations: 1)Black women writers are declaring their independence as never before; 2) black women writers are gaining autonomous influence over other black women; 3) black women writers are causing *their existence* to be seen and felt in areas of American society and culture which have heretofore been barred to them; and 4) black women writers are at last wresting recognition from the white literary powers that be." 201(Emphases added) My suggestion that the black male critics of For Colored Girls were rejecting the "otherness" of black femaleness might be seen to coincide to a greater extent with Hernton's first and third points.

together against black women, aligning themselves with a mainstream patriarchal discourse. Arguably, in so doing, they attempted to expel the black woman to a peripheral status, in order to reinstate themselves as the bearers of the truth.[41]

If For Colored Girls is a radical dramatic text because of its "experimental and diverse forms of representation" (Griffin 39), it is a transgressive one because of its ability to expose the lies of mainstream ideology and patriarchy from a position that embraces contradictions with "brutal honesty", (Omolade 290)[42] while refusing "all the guilt and grime" (Shange 54).

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41 This point is substantiated by Hernton. Where I speak of black women being relegated to a peripheral status, in keeping with feminist theoretical discourses, Hernton employs a clearer analogy. He argues that "[t]oo often black men have a philosophy of manhood that *relegates women to the back burner*.Therefore it is perceived as an offense for black women to struggle on their own, let alone achieve something independently." (202)(emphases added) According to Hernton "[t]he telling thing about the hostile attitude of black men toward black women writers is that they interpret the new thrust of the women as being 'counter-productive' to the historical goal of the Black Struggle. Revealingly, while black men have achieved out-standing recognition throughout the history of black writing, black women have not accusd the men of collaborating with the enemy and setting ack the progress of the race."(201)

42 Omolade refers to the "brutal honesty" of black women artists who articulate what she calls the black experience.

THE OUTSIDER WITHIN THE ACADEMY

At the Warwick Women and Theatre Conference (1990),[1] I presented an untitled working paper on Ntozake Shange's choreopoem For Colored Girls. Unbeknown to myself at the time (I was two years into my research at that stage), my interest in what I then described as the outsider-within would become a constant refrain *vis-à-vis* black women in a predominantly white mainstream culture. The term outsider-within was and perhaps still is a problematic one. In 1990 however I found it satisfactory because I felt that it adequately described my growing sense of being an anomaly within the academic institution.[2] There was one other paper that dealt with black women's writing. It was an attempt to analyse Maya Angelou's I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings (1974) in the light of Hélène Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine*.[3]

During the plenary session, when delegates were invited to make comments or put specific questions to any of the speakers, Jill Davis made a memorable general comment. Addressing - though not directly to me - the issue of the outsider, or marginalised subject, she questioned why it was that one had constantly to refer to the outsider, to being an outsider, to choosing a position outside and so on, when power quite obviously resides elsewhere. At the time I could only interpret this as a re-buff to my paper but some four years on, I believe that Davis' comment can be addressed from a slightly more informed (and hence, a more confident) position.

To this end, rather than using "the conclusion" as a functional necessity to "close" the thesis, I intend to re-introduce and re-address an issue that was raised in a general plenary four years ago. I do so for two reasons. Firstly, because I wish to acknowledge the fact that Davis' query has always led me to be critically cautious of terminology that re-situates black women *elsewhere* within the framework of mainstream ideology, and secondly, because as a black woman academic and performer, and, within the context of a thesis that seeks to examine the work of black female theatre practitioners and writers, I think that it is important to address more

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1 I have already referred to this conference in Chapter Four. It was held at the University of Warwick, May 1990

2 I was elated and disheartened when I saw the term verified by Hill Collins in Black Feminist Thought. On the one hand it was the first time that I had considered myself to be part of a tradition of black female academics who also coined clumsy compound words. On the other, I was still labouring under the naive assumption that research entailed being an "explorer", and articulating the as yet unarticulated. Hill Collins had beaten me to it!

3 Nikki Goode presented this paper, a young white woman who at the time was in the early stages of her research and interested in examining the possibilities of reading black women's writing in relation to *écriture féminine*.

directly what multiple internal monologues occur when this "outsider" treads cautiously and/or confidently in to academe.

For the sake of clarity, and in order to address Davis' points in a more defined context, I take the liberty of re-phrasing her query, to ask in simple terms: firstly, from an institutional context (academe) what is the value of referring to the black woman as an outsider-within? Secondly, why might black women choose to situate themselves in this nebulous region that seems to remain socially and politically undefinable, perhaps unrecognisable? Finally, what is the nature of the perspective from the outsider-within position? (This last point is my own but it does relate to Davis' general query).

In order not to become completely engrossed in a subjective analysis I shall align my own "outsider" experiences with those of two other black women. Both women have written essays which variously address Davis' response to the "outsider" at the 1990 conference. I have deliberately selected these essays because they are written by black female academics who are themselves engaged in black feminist praxis. British-based fiction writer Jackie Roy (1993) in "Black Women Writing and Reading" writes of the "complexity of the position of black women" (43).[4] American-based Ghanaian poet Abena P A Busia (1993) writes in response to Homi Bhabha's "Translating Identity" (1989), in order to locate and define "[t]he indeterminate aspects of 'identity' that slide between the concept of 'hybridity'" and the translation of that 'hybridity' (204).[5]

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> I had fought through very difficult emotional tasks in order to allow myself to say: 'Okay, as weird as *this* is, *this* is truly how I feel. Therefore, if I write anything else, it would be a lie. So as long as I'm thinking about *this*, and I know how I feel about *this*, you have to see *it*, *too*'. In other words my self-consciousness has nothing really to do with other people. It has to do with whether or not I'm going to confront what I'm feeling. (Tate 152)

Hill Collins' elaboration of the outsider-within position, is not, from a black female perspective negatively rendered. Referring to black female academics she insists that

> paradoxically, being treated as an invisible Other gives Black women a peculiar angle of vision, the outsider-within stance that has served so many African-American women intellectuals as a source of tremendous strength (94).

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4 Jackie Roy, "Black Women Writing and Reading", in Black Women's Writing 43-54.

5 Abena P.A. Busia, "Performance Transcription and the Language of the Self", in Theorizing Black Feminisms 203-214.

In the light of arguments by black feminists and feminists of colour who are constantly attempting to resist invisibility and marginalisation,[6] this might appear to be a damaging and regressive statement. Hill Collins' point, however, is not to celebrate the exclusionary practices of mainstream institutions. Instead she is addressing the way in which Black women within the academy can become self-defining with the recognition of their "peculiar angle of vision". By implication this Other('s) way of seeing is not shared by the dominant group. But to stress the "tremendous strength" of the outsider-within belies the process of equally tremendous anxiety and/or uncertainty that occurs before, or indeed can accompany, the sense of liberation that comes with defining oneself as an outsider-within.

As a black female academic I, like Jackie Roy became wary and cynical when Black women's writing began to gain credence in universities in Britain (Roy 43). The continued absence of black female students and black female lecturers in higher education only served to aggravate my uncertainty. To my increasing anxiety, I found myself the focus of unwarranted (academic) attention, perhaps because like Trinh Minh-ha, it was felt that I, as a black woman - and an academic one at that - could speak to the truth of black female experience. I began to realise that, on a number of occasions, whilst in attendance at feminist and/or theatre conferences "I [was] sometimes required ... to be representative of *the* black feminist perspective" (Roy 53),[7] or sometimes the black perspective, as if *the black perspective* were an easily representable whole.[8] I refused to adopt this position not only because, as Roy points out, there are a multitude of black female experiences and realities (53), but because I was unsure as to what aspects of black femaleness I was required to relate (to). Secondly, within the parameters of academic discourse, I felt unable and/or unwilling to

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6 The following essays variously examine the marginalisation of black women and/or women of colour. Aida Hurtado, "Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Colour", Signs 14 (1989):833-855; Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought", Signs 14 (1989):745-773; Felly Nkweto Simmonds, "She's Gotta Have It: The Representation of Black Female Sexuality on Film" Feminist Review 29 (1988):10-21.

7 I am referring to the conference held at Lancaster University "Points of Contact: Performance, Politics, and Ideology", April 5 1990. The conference, chaired by Professor Peter Thompson of Exeter University, sought to examine the relationship between ideology and performance in an international context. There were a number of notable theatre practitioners present including: Margaretta D'Arcy and John Arden from Ireland, Uptal Dutt (India), Hugo Mendine (Chile), Petr Ozly (cultural attaché to Vâclav Havel of Czechoslovakia), Richard Schechner (America), Augusto Boal (Brazil). British practitioners included Clive Barker, Deborah Levy, Gillian Hanna, Albert Hunt. There were two video interviews screened for the occasion with Dario Fo and Franca Rame, and with Wole Soyinka who was unable to attend. In my review of the conference for the Women and Theatre Newsletter, I wrote "[a]s with so many conferences/events of this size (two hundred delegates) there will always be certain problems. The absence of Kole Omotosa from Nigeria meant that there were no Afro-Caribbean speakers and only two black delegates were present ... that said, the organisers stated that invitations were sent to a number of black theatre companies."

8 The irony of this situation is that at no point before I began research for the paper on For Colored Girls was I involved in black women's writing or theatre. My research interests were located in the area of French feminism, European theatre, and the plays of Deborah Levy.

offer a coherent and objective account of blackness and femaleness. These queries, Roy suggests, "arise whenever I, as a Black woman, consider communicating my position. They are indicative of the fact that as yet there are relatively few black women speakers" (44).

The relative absence of black women in British institutions of higher education has resulted in an absence of discourses that can address the racial, cultural, political and intellectual concerns of black women in general.[9] It must be stressed that in the late 1980s, it was relatively easy being the only black woman at women's conferences that were addressing women's theatrical and/or feminist concerns; more so than being the only black person at a mixed (theatre) conference. This might have been due to the fact that my own racial and gender differences were heightened, or as Shange might argue, my sense of my own "metaphysical dilemma" (Shange 45) was greater in the presence of all-white female and male (conference) delegates. With hindsight I can speculate that this was due to the fact that I was more aware of my racial *and* gender difference in a mixed environment, whereas at feminist conferences, broadly speaking, I had only to contend with racial difference. Being an outsider, then, or defining myself as an outsider was not as problematic in the confines of feminist conferences. At the time, however, I had yet to consider the outsider-within as a potentially liberating stance. My overwhelming concern at this stage was to ask where all the other black women were.

This same point was raised at the fifth Magdalena conference entitled "Process: The Devising of Original Material" (1989).[10] The Magdalena Project is an international network dedicated to exploring the work of women in contemporary theatre. On this occasion, the Magdalena Project had invited five female practitioners to lead workshops that were based on the process of devising in the theatre. They included: Geddy

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9 This situation *is* changing and as such must be acknowledged. So-called ethnic minorities are encouraged, along with other "disadvantaged groups", to enter into higher education following the Conservative government's policy of access to higher education. Furthermore, a number of British academic institutions are implementing faculties and/or validating courses on Black and/or Cultural Studies. As part of the new Women's Studies undergraduate course at the University of Leeds, for example, a one-year course (or module) is being proposed in Black Women's Studies, a course that the organisers hope will be taught predominantly by black female academics. Similarly, at the University of Warwick, the department of Translation Studies has expanded massively to become a centre for British Cultural and Comparative Studies. The "new" universities, formerly polytechnics and colleges of higher education, tend to offer, in the drive towards modularisation, modules and/or electives in the area of Black Studies. While acknowledging these gradual changes - changes which are not wholly unproblematic - I am curious in the same way that Clare Venables was in describing the absence of female directors, as to when the trickle will "become a flood" See Clare Venables "The Woman Director in the Theatre" in Theatre Quaterly 10 (1980):3-7; see also hooks Yearning (51-54)

10 I am indebted to my supervisor Professor Susan Bassnett who introduced me to the director of the Magdalena Project, Jill Greenhalgh, and also gave me the opportunity to document the week long process. The documentation of this process has been reproduced in the thesis as appendix I. I have included this specifically for the second half of the thesis, because I believe, it marks the early stages of a process that attempts to work through the outsider-within.

Aniksdal, Norwegian theatre practitioner and a member of Grenland Friteater in Norway; Annie Griffin, American actress, who had previously worked with Theatre de Complicité and was a founder member of Gloria theatre company; Gerd Christiansen, a sculptor, set designer and actress from Denmark; Ida Kelarova, a descendant of an East European Gypsy culture, a singer and songwriter; and Magdalena Pietruska, a Polish actress who teaches at the Ingmar Linds Institute in Italy. Throughout the process of devising original material, the workshops were also seeking in various ways to address the issue of creating a women's language in theatre. Many of the younger women at the conference, including myself were uncritical but strident enthusiasts of Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975). It followed for us at the time that if there was a women's style of writing - *écriture féminine* - which gave rise to an exciting new concept known as *jouissance* then surely it was only "natural" that there should be a *dramatique féminine.*

Altogether "seventy-three women and ten men" attended the Project (appendix 233). As I point out in the documentation that, although the fifth Magdalena Project was aimed at younger women, there were women present from a range of theatrical and professional backgrounds. For the most part, the younger women, who were in their early to mid-twenties, were hoping to become professional theatre practitioners in non-commercial theatre. The older women by contrast had varying degrees of experience in theatre practice, either as practitioners or academics or both.

In the closing plenary, which was chaired by Gilly Adams, the younger women were invited to give their responses to the week of work in process. The disappointment they voiced, because there had been no rigorous examination of feminine/feminist theatre practice *per se*, or of a female theatre language, prompted Annie Griffin to challenge the notion of creating a women's language given the relative homogenous nature of the group as a whole. "There are no blacks or Asians, so making it incredibly *safe*", she argued (appendix 248).[11] As Greenhalgh pointed out, publicity material had been sent to "women of colour". In this safe arena,[12] which, I have to admit, gave me a sense of added status because of my role of documenting the process, I began to formulate my response to the perpetual dilemma of being an outsider. I did this by forging links between my outsider role as *rapporteur* and my outsider self as a black woman.

On reflection, it would be easy to view my distrust and uncertainty at being the only black woman in attendance at feminist/theatre conferences as one of intellectual insecurity. However, I found it difficult to reverse the context and to imagine a situation

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11 I was not included in Griffin's observation because I was not part of the workshop process, I was documenting from the "outside". Another point to add is that Griffin only challenged racial homogeneity. She ignored other differences, such as class, sexual identity etc.

12 "Safe" for whom, some might query.

in which a white feminist/theatre academic present at an exclusively black female conference, would be invited to relate and/or interpret the experiences of black female participants, especially if the "choice of names ... styles of speech, dress poetry and jive" (Jordan 33) did not conform to a recognised or "standard English". How, then I queried, could I be sure that I would be able to execute my role faithfully and efficiently?[13] More importantly perhaps, (and this variously raises the issue of assimilation in chapter one and that of "dilemma" in Chapter Four), if I did produce the required document, in the acceptable and *approved* syntax and discourse, would it have been achieved at the cost of aligning myself with "the fetters of the academy and its shadow on Black woman's thought" (Omolade 290)?

Hill Collins argues, that "[i]n an attempt to minimise the differences between the cultural context of African-American communities and the expectations of social institutions, some women dichotomize their behavior and become two different people, [while] [o]thers reject their cultural context and work against their own best interests by enforcing the dominant group's specialized thought" (233). I began to question whether there were not more creative, but no less critical, ways of articulating black and female "knowledge-claims" (Hill Collins 233), without the need to adopt schizophrenic role-play.[14]

In the context of the Magdalena Project, it became important to articulate and create for myself a mental framework that allowed me to shift between the space which the participants inhabited and the space which I inhabited as observer; the intellectual spaces which the young women occupied, and the theatrical space from which the workshop leaders were devising material, the space that I brought with me as a young black woman and the spaces that the participants occupied as white women. Finally, in view of the process of documenting, a framework or a process that would allow me to observe the workshops at a distance as an *outsider* without alienating me from the *inside* event as a whole. Only such a fractured/fragmented perception of the event, and of myself in relation to the Project, would enable me to avoid debilitating dichotomous behaviour. It could be argued of course that such a completely fractured sense of self in relation to the Project is equally as damaging if not more so than the dichotomy that Hill Collins describes. However, I would argue that the dichotomous stance that Hill

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13 This need not necessarily be a race issue. A working-class woman might articulate similar issues with regards to so-called standard English, dress and so on amongst a middle-class majority. In this instance, the ideas of a dominant and muted group as demonstrated by Shirley Ardner might be more appropriate. See Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society (Oxford: Berg, 1993); also Elaine Showalter "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", in Writing and Sexual Difference (ed.) Elizabeth Abel for an explication of Ardner's theory of relations between dominant and muted groups.

14 I was not required for the Magdalena Project to articulate black and female experiences, but it follows that being the only black woman amongst a racially homogenous group would inform my process of observation and the ways that I perceived myself in relation to the group.

Collins describes is debilitating precisely because it is a binarist stance. Cixous' view of this schema is that in order for one side of the binary oppositional schema to assert itself or come into being, it must effectively destroy the Other.[15] Within a schema that is predicated on multifarious and potentially indeterminate possibilities, the death-drive that Cixous describes cannot be enacted, since choices are not constrained to either/or. Instead, the self moves amongst possibilities, settling for positions that will allow other desired potentials to arise, in order that other positions and (combinations of positions) might be enacted.

Although I do not articulate this process of fragmentation quite so clearly in the document, I was aware of the fact that I had various interests to address, and I questioned how I would tackle this:

> [i]nitially, I was not sure whether to adopt the position of "outside eye", or indeed whether to somehow inscribe myself into the process of documenting. Eventually I decided to somehow use both approaches ... [and] ... adopt the point of view of a young *and* black woman. (appendix 234)

Once the critical and practical frameworks were established it became easier to shift between groups and within the group as a whole. I was learning then to use "[my] outsider within perspective[s] as a source of insight and ideas" (Hill Collins 233). In this instance an understanding of my role as an outside eye and my perception of myself as an outsider because I was the only black woman allowed me to effect strategies that would keep the work of documenting, and myself as black female subject, in process. It also enabled me to resist being homologised into a mainstream context that might erase or negate my differences of view(s). At the Magdalena Project, the experience of racial isolation was critically countered and positively rendered by deliberately engaging or *playing* with the outsider-within stance. In wider social or institutional contexts the process of naming and re-positioning myself in relation to the dominant group (that is the white men and women participants), enables me to be self-defining. While Davis challenges the outsider position as a powerless region, Hill Collins recognises the fact that "[m]uch of the best of Black feminist thought reflects this effort to find a self-defined voice" and space (Hill Collins 94).[16] In view of this, I am less interested in moving towards obvious domains of power in given social and/or institutional contexts and more concerned to resist inclusion, preferring instead to shift between selves and regions in a self-aware and self-defining way. Busia expresses it in the following way:

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15 See Hélène Cixous, "Sorties" in The Newly Born Woman 63-129. Cixous argues that "the movement whereby each opposition is set up to make sense is the movement through which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time, a war is let loose. Death is always at work" (64).

16 I am fully aware of the fact that there is a dialectical process being enacted here, because the notion of *self*- defining suggests in the first instance, that there is a core *self* to be defined in opposition, or relation to others.

> [t]he divisions [between selves] are not so sharply drawn, we are not so neatly divided. Underneath it all remains that moment of epiphany. I can play visual games with how I am seen and dressed, but it does not denude that moment when I [make] identification with my words and how I [see] myself. And it does not belie my constant negotiation with various selves which results in hybrid modes of dress (209).

It was in this process of shifting and re-defining selves and contexts, while fully acknowledging and keeping in view the power that resides within the dominant group(s), that I began to perceive the potential of the outsider-within (this also speaks to Phelan's debate in Chapter Three of the marked and unmarked, of visibility and invisibility politics).

In a more rigidly defined and institutional context, such as academe, shifting, defining, re-positioning the self in relation to the dominant group(s) and/or structures is of course much more problematic. The Magdalena Project lasted for seven days, and I arrived on the third day. The participants, the workshop leaders and the director of the Project were all (white) women, hence Griffin's insistence on the safeness of the working environment.[17]

In the academic setting, the experience of being the only black student or the only black (British) academic in a department presents different sets of problems and consequently they require different sets of strategies. As Bennet (1964) argues, [c]ontrary to the generally accepted opinion, power does not inhere in individuals. Without access to institutionalized power, individuals are powerless"(28). Perhaps this is one of the reasons that prompted Davis to query the apparently isolated position of the outsider. As Roy observes:

> [b]lack women must not merely be talked about [in terms of black women's writing], we must be in a position to speak for ourselves, and this can only be achieved when many more of us are admitted to those platforms which dictate the way in which representations are made, higher education and all areas of media communication must ensure that Black women hold positions that enable us to represent our own experiences and perceptions of ourselves. Until this happens, we will be seldom heard (53).

Roy's visibility politics challenge Phelan's wariness of that same politics, but then Roy articulates the experience of studying in an academic environment in which there were no black lecturers, four black women students and no black men. As I have already mentioned, that situation is being reversed, to the point that "[e]veryone seems to be clamoring for 'difference'" (hooks 54). Yet as hooks points out, while the

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17 I am not criticising the safe premise of the Project here. While the racial homogeneity might have made it easier for the women to engage in various theatrical processes, it must be remembered that in the context of theatre in general the Magdalena Project provides an arena in which women can experiment to produce formally and thematically *non-safe* theatre practice - that is, non-commercial theatre - and this is crucial for women who have no desire to be involved with mainstream theatre practice

"appearance of difference" has become a cause of intellectual celebration, one needs to ask who is being recruited to teach and/or write about it (hooks 54).

I am in sympathy with hooks' and Roy's arguments (there is after all a noticeable lack of British black academics, especially in the Arts),[18] but I also think it would be problematic to recruit black women to teach only black women's writing (literary or dramatic), despite the fact that it would clearly be desirable to have black women academics disseminating black feminist epistemology. However, another debate arises when and if we are recruited to fill what I have come to term *the-black-women-and* slot, that of intellectual ghettoisation.[19] Should we be content to see black women students and academics populating the seminar rooms and questioning whether black women are still the mules of the world?[20] Or should we applaud the black woman who appears to have been invited into the academy through the *front door*, as opposed to the b[l]ack door, and who is invited to teach across disciplines and canons - Afro- and Eurocentric?

In the academic environment I encountered a different set of complexities, ones that foregrounded issues surrounding self-representation in a predominantly white academic context, teaching aspects of African-American theatre and history, as well as black women's dramatic texts to, all-white and middle class students.

II

> And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger (Lorde 42).

It is one thing to be a part of a milieu that is constantly seeking to evolve, through feminist praxis, ways of overcoming racist, sexist and mainstream assumptions

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18 At the time of writing Roy observed that "[a]ll British polytechnics and universities have serious deficiencies with regard to Black staff, particularly women". She goes on to discuss the impossiblity of finding a black female supervisor for her Phd "If I want to pursue a research project (which at present is expected to focus on Black women's writing from a black feminist perspective), I shall probably have to go to America." (69)

19 In his autobiography Malcolm X maintains that "most whites even when they credit a Negro with some intelligence, will still feel that all he can talk about is the race issue; most whites never feel that Negroes can contribute anything to other areas of thought and ideas. You just notice how rarely you will ever hear whites asking any Negroes what they think about the problem of world health, or the space race to land men on the moon." (400).

20 This is a paraphrased expression from Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937; London: Virago, 1986). When the protagonist of Hurston's novel, Janie, expresses disgust at the man she is expected to marry, the Grandmother who raised her from childhood "sat bolt upright and put her feet to the floor ... she slapped the girl's face violently and, forced her head back so that their eyes met in struggle ... she brushed back the heavy hair from Janie's face and stood there suffering and loving and weeping internally for both of them. `Come to yo' Grandma, honey. Yo' Grandma wouldn't harm a hair uh yo' head....Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out ... De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you.'" (Reprinted in Daughters of Africa (ed) Margaret Busby (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) 187-195 (191)).

about women in theatre practice; and quite another to find myself in a environment in which those same assumptions are rarely voiced, unless they arise as specific problems. The *institution* of higher education it seems (as opposed to particular departments) will facilitate a token black presence "only as long as we [do not] cause unease or embarrassment" (Roy 44). Roy, however, fails to acknowledge the fact that the feelings of "unease or embarrassment" can travel both ways. In the instance that she describes, the discomfort referred solely to a white middle class reception of black culture. However, there are contexts in which the unease lies clearly on the side of the black speaker(s), writer(s) or community in general.

This was clearly demonstrated at the Women's Studies Network Conference (Nene College, Northampton) in June 1993. Millsom Henry, a young research student from the University of Stirling, presented a working paper on the representation of black women in popular culture.[21] One of the controversial issues that arose from the paper was whether or not black women should articulate, in a public arena, the intra-cultural divisions and antagonisms in view of the fact that the white community might exploit the differences or issues at stake within the black community. Some black women argued against entering into debate with whites about problems that might be specific to the black community. This belief extends beyond feminist conferences. It is an issue that has been raised in reference to black cultural production and black self-representation by black scholars, men and women that I have cited in previous chapters. These intellectuals have questioned and/or challenged representations of blackness that might be appropriated and inverted for racist motivations.

James Weldon Johnson (1930) points out that as far back as the beginning of the nineteenth century, white actors were appropriating representations of Negroes for commercial gain. Not until 1843 did the first Negro minstrel troupes began to establish themselves (Johnson 88). The difference between white and black negro minstrel acts was that the former used black-face minstrelsy to ridicule and/or demean the African-American; whereas for the latter, minstrelsy became a professional theatrical skill. Johnson maintains that Negro minstrels followed the performance pattern established by white minstrel performers, "even to blacking their faces" (89). However , despite this

> [t]Hess performers could not help bringing to professional minstrelsy something fresh and original. They brought a great deal that was new in dancing, by exhibiting in their perfection the jig, the buck and wing, and the tantalizing stop-time dances. (89)

In essence however, blackface had already been *corrupted* (before it was reappropriated by African-American performers), because it was "[o]riginally devised for the white man playing the servile black" (Savran 30). As I point out in Chapter Two,

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21 Millsom Henry, "Portraits of Black Women in Popular Culture".

Johnson (1930) observed that African-Americans of the time *did* enjoy the minstrel performances and would engage positively with the humour of the show if they were ridiculed or parodied on stage by Negro performers, but only in the presence of an all Negro audience (Johnson 173). This again points to the way in which blacks have felt the need to disguise or conceal those socio-cultural features or characteristics of blackness that might inspire racist appropriation by whites.[22] Hatch and Shine (1974) describe the controversy that arose in response to Angelina Weld Grimke's Rachel (1916). They argue that "[t]he black audience was divided in its reaction to the play in much the same fashion that it would be today" (Hatch and Shine 137). The controversy was in response to the way in which the performance of Rachel was felt to be too revealing and confrontational, because of Grimke's portrayal of the way blacks were subject to the "innumerable humiliations" of whites, particularly with regard to lynching (Hatch and Shine 137). The editors point out that the play was probably written for two audiences: a black and a white, and question how much of the black image the playwright will permit the white reader to see. "For it is a fact that if the black man gives the white man one inch toward a stereotype, he will take a mile" (Hatch and Shine 138).

Rejecting the impulse to focus on the need of African-Americans to shield themselves from white racist domination, Mae Henderson (1991) describes Morrison's appropriation of the DuBoisian "veil".[23] For Morrison this veil, rather than expressing a division between the African-American and white communities, highlights the "division *within* the race - separating the speakable from the *unspeakable* and the *unspoken*" (Henderson 63). There are then cultural and racial issues which blacks refuse to articulate both within the community itself and outside the community amongst non-whites for fear that this will lead to denigrating reprisals in the form of racist reappropriations of those same experiences.

This problem is confronted and tackled by Russell *et al.* in The Color Complex (1992) as an on-going contemporary issue. They acknowledge the fact that "[m]ost Blacks are careful about letting Whites in on their "dirty little secret" (3) but feel that given the multicultural context of American society, it is no longer necessary to conceal such problems. However "[w]hen Kathy attempted to research color bias, she soon bumped up against old attitudes. 'I wouldn't mess with that', she was told. 'Just one more thing for White people to use against us'" (4).

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22 Some might argue that this has been taken to the extreme of internalized racism in which black physical characteristics are *mutilated* by, for example, bleaching creams which lighten black skins and, at the other extreme, cosmetic surgery to anglicize black/African features.

23 Du Bois refers to the "Veil" in The Souls of Black Folk. He writes of "two worlds within and without the Veil" pvi, these two worlds being the black and white communities. For Du Bois, the writing of The Souls of Black Folk entailed "[l]eaving ... the white world, ... and step[ping] within the Veil", in order to reveal the strivings "that live within the Veil" (vi).

Thus far I have presented the social context in which African-Americans *veil* the supposedly unspeakable and/or the unspoken. However, the same attitudes can be witnessed in terms of Black cultural production, specifically theatre where representations of blackness are given to be seen in performance. Brown-Guillory, for example, points to the work of nineteenth and early twentieth-century black women playwrights who, as I point out in Chapter Two chose not to write folk plays, opting instead to write genteel plays or what she describes as "best-foot-forward plays" . These plays rejected the African-American folk heroines that characterised the dramas of Georgia Douglas Johnson *et al.* and re-presented middle class blacks who adopted the values and language of the mainstream white culture. The issue of "Black English" and standard English has presented an on-going dilemma for male and female black scholars who over time have demonstrated marked differences in response to what status to give "Black English", relative to so-called standard English.[24] The African-American poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, (1872-1906), was perhaps one of the greatest exponents of black dialect poetry.[25] Yet as Johnson points out, the post-World War One poets of the next generation

> discarded traditional dialect and the stereotyped material of Negro poetry. Its members did not concern themselves with the sound of the banjo and the singing around the cabin door.... They broke away entirely from the limitations of pathos and humor ... from the use of subject material that had already been over-used by white American poets of a former generation ... (262).

Instead, Johnson explains that "incongruous as it may seem", this young generation of poets used the sonnet to articulate the voices of the masses and the anger of a people whose history was thus far characterised by "disillusionment, protest and challenge" (Johnson 263).[26]

Shange observes a similar *mistrust* of dialect poetry in her students who, she discovered, were "trying to correct Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poetry. So it's not just the white folks. They actually tried to read it in 'good' English" (Tate 164).[27] Shange herself refuses to write in standard English. The poetry in For Colored Girls works to deliberately disrupt standard syntactical structures and standard grammar, resulting in a

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24 See June Jordan, "White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation" in Moving Towards Home: Political Essays

25 He was also a novelist; however, his characterisation of black dialect is probably best in his poems. See The Collected Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar (ed.) Benjamin Brawley (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1962).

26 Of course such a choice would appear to be highly incongruous, given that the post- war generation of poets chose to articulate African-American discontent within a white literary form.

27 See Wisker, Black Women's Writing. She suggests that "[t]here is a problem in reading Black writing if you are yourself a Black student " (14). Her point is that black students might feel that representation of blacks in black literature might be too personal and adds "[i]f they feel any indentification with the experiences and ideas represented in such texts it will further equate them with the non-dominant group" (13).

linguistic "structure [that] is connected to the music that I hear beneath the words ... [f]or instance, if I'm hearing a rumba, you'll get a poem that looks like a rumba on the page" (Tate 164). Shange's mode of writing, however, goes beyond reflecting content and/or music in its formal structures. It is also her way of *attacking* the colonising tendency of standard English. I reproduce here her extensive and poetic response to white critics, as an example of the way in which the form of her writing underpins her politics on race and gender and vice versa.

> one new york critic accused me of being too/self-conscious of being a writer/the other from the midwest had asserted that i waz so/involved with the destruction of the english language/that my writing approached verbal/gymnastics like unto a reverse minstrel show. in reality/there is an element of truth in both ideas/but the lady who thought i waz self-conscious of being a writer/apparently waz never a blk child who knew that no black people conducted themselves like amos n andy/she was not a blk child who knew that blk children didnt wear tiger skins n chase lions around trees n then eat pancakes/she wazent a blk child who spoke an english that had evolved naturally/only to hear a white man's version of blk speech that waz entirely made up & based on no/ linguistic system besides the language of racism. the man who thought i wrote with/intentions of outdoing the white man in the acrobatic distortion of english waz absolutely/correct. i cant count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n main the language that i waz taught to hate myself in/the language that perpetuates the notions/that cause pain to every black child as he/she learns to speak of the world & the "self." yes/being an afro-american writer is something to be self-conscious abt/& yes/in order to think/n communicate the thoughts n feelings i want to think n communicate/i haveta fix my tool to my needs/i have to take it apart to the bone/so that the malignancies/fall away/leaving us space to literally create our own image.[28]

Given these numerous examples which variously highlight the *problem* of blackness as a cultural and linguistic sign in a dominant white culture I shall now briefly discuss the first time that I taught <u>For Colored Girls</u> to a group of all-white and female final-year theatre studies undergraduates,[29] and how I introduced the same text to a group of all white and female Theatre Studies post-graduate students.

The first time that I encountered the problems of teaching (or perhaps of translating) black feminist dramatic writing to all-white students, I was no more than one or two years older than the students and presumed in the light of this, perhaps naively, that just as I carried representations of popular white and/or British culture in my head, as well as corresponding black images, they would have images of black culture in theirs.[30] I also presumed that the group, or most of the group would be familiar with black American English and music (despite the fact that Shange's musical

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28 Ntozake Shange, <u>Plays: One</u> (London: Methuen 1992) (67-68).

29 This was my first part-time teaching post, in the Department of English and Drama at the University of Loughborough: 1988-1990.

30 Perhaps this was not such a naive presumption after all. I was brought up in a "multicultural" environment in which blacks and whites were extremely wise to representations of blackness as distinct from whiteness. This included language.

cues are from artists of the 1950s and 1960s), since those cultural forms are constantly transmitted through the media and popular culture. I had not considered the fact that in the first instance, even before the women encountered such problematic representations of, for example, black women/men, that they would encounter a language problem. That is to say they were unable to understand Shange's writing in the vernacular: black English. Those who had persisted until the end of the dramatic choreopoem found that "a nite with beau willie brown" was the most accessible poem/narrative perhaps because the monologue as a whole has a reasonably conventional narrative structure, where most of the other dramatic poems do not. Also there is a narrator in this poem and two characters, willie and crystal, and the action progresses in a logical and linear fashion. (A number of the other poems have less conventional narrative structures; for example "i used to live in the world" (36) and "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff" (49)). The other narratives had left the women feeling alienated from the choreopeom as a whole Acknowledging the problem of teaching black women's writing in a majority white context, Griffin states

> [i]n teaching Black women's writing within a limited temporal space one had thus to consider how to deal with white students' unfamiliarity with such writing *per se* as well as with their responses to the various forms and contents of their work" (20)

Relatively speaking, it had been easier introducing the students to the complex post-structuralist psychoanalytic theories of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous than it had been to open up a black world view to them, given the "limited temporal space". What also proved to be interesting was not the fact that most of the women were unable to grasp the ideas behind the opening poem but that I was unable adequately to translate the experiences that were being articulated therein.[31] It was clear that the students lacked the cultural means required to understand the choreopoem and I experienced a feeling of self-consciousness in attempting to *open up* the dramatic text to them; for that, it seemed, would have also entailed "telling it like it is" and I was not entirely sure at that moment that my allegiances did not lie with the "don't rock the boat" faction.[32] I felt that (rightly or wrongly) *telling it like it was* would have involved situating or defining myself as a black woman in relation or opposition to the group as white women' an "act of self-revelation", in a number of different ways, and one that I was not prepared to commit at that time.

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31 Or perhaps, it was a psychological block/response to articulating the lives of the women in the choreopoem, given the argument that surrounds disseminating black racial issues in a white majority social and/or institutional context

32 These are popular expressions. Hatch and Shine use them to describe the two points of view that define contemporary black theatre, ie: "tell it like it is" *versus* "don't rock the boat". I would say that the former is an example of black American English that suggests divulging hard and difficult facts, personal or otherwise, with impunity.

Three years later however, when the focus of my research had shifted to black women's dramatic writing, the challenge of introducing African-American theatre history in general and black women's dramatic writing in particular was much less daunting. Although none of the women had studied black women's writing, most of them were familiar to varying degrees with materialist feminist theories, and Anglo-American women's writing and theatre.

Rather than feeling compelled to offer my interpretation of the choreopoem, I invited the group to give their initial responses and discovered that, for the most part, the group stressed the universal nature of the thematic concerns. Some identified with the poems that dealt specifically with inter-personal relations and agreed that these dramatic monologues could be *everywoman's*. However, when I encouraged the group to develop the ideas and thematic concerns in terms of the *Coloured* women's relationship to the dominant white culture, the responses were less forthcoming. In other words perhaps inevitably, once the text was removed from the familiar context of universality and situated in a (cultural and political) space that militated against notions of everywoman, English (language) and the body, the group were unable to find a feminist and/or cultural framework through which to view either the individual poems or the choreopoem as a whole.

On this occasion I offered the group ways of seeing the dramatic text that highlighted the Coloured bodies' rejection of racist representations of Colouredness and encouraged them to view the Coloured women, not as victims, but as strategists and survivors who are looking to constantly re-define themselves in order to be self-determining. The women, I suggested, make choices that are based on their desire to "sing a black girls song" (Shange 4) and to reject dominant white and male versions of their songs. Thus, I argued, crystal is not a victim, neither is her narrative, danced by the *lady in red*, a victim's account of physical abuse. Instead I attempted to argue for ways in which she might be viewed as one who refuses victim status by opting to challenge willie's violence. Within her restricted material and economic confines, she utilises the judicial agencies - in this instance the police and the courts - in order to protect herself and her children. (The effectiveness of this as a strategy along with the effectiveness of those institutions is not what is being contended here) In other words, in order to counter being violently *acted upon*, she takes action, by seeking the aid of white social institutions against a black man.[33]

I also argued that the lady in red who seduces men only to dismiss them and cry herself to sleep, is not a victim secretly yearning for a successful relationship. In other

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33 crystal's [*sic*]actions cannot be underestimated here. I recall McKay's discussion and analysis of the Hill *versus* Thomas court case. As McKay points out "if she were telling the truth, I knew that Anita Hill was doing the *hard, brave*, right and only moral thing under the circumstances (emphases added) (270).

words, rather than stressing on the one hand the down-trodden status of the Coloured women, or their indomitable strength on the other, I attempted to offer a view that spoke to the "everyday nature ... of black men's physical and emotional abuse of Black women" (Hill Collins 187) and the ways in which this routine oppression "is part of a larger system of legitimised violence" (Hill-Collins 187). The problem I found here was that the farther afield I shifted the normative feminist framework, through which to view the Coloured bodies and text so that the group's initial universalist perceptions were less central to the debate, the more vociferously they argued for the victim status of the Coloured bodies. In other words, once I offered suggestions that categorically rejected universalist white feminist assumptions, and spoke of another feminist perception of so-called reality/experience, some of the group continued to wrench universalist presumptions into view, as the only way of debating female oppression. Arguing from a Marxist feminist perspective, some insisted that there could be no liberation or choice for women who were shackled to the economic base, and that any expressions of liberation or self-empowerment were simply classical demonstrations of false consciousness.

More problematic, however, were the poems which addressed physical violence. Conscious once again of the problem of articulating intra-racial conflicts to an all-white group, I attempted to address the issue by recourse to a reasonably *safe* academic essay by Selwyn Cudjoe (1984) which explores the autobiographical nature of Maya Angelou's fiction. However, his view that "to be Black and female is to faced with a special quality of violence and violation" (14), coupled with his insistence that Angelou's quest was "for understanding and love rather than for bitterness and despair" (11), only seemed to create a greater gulf between members of the group, who felt that I was glorifying female oppression, and myself. For my part I realised that I had aligned myself with another cultural and racial context - one that I was beginning to realise was startlingly absent from my daily encounters with students - and that this had bred resentment in a group that were more accustomed to seeing "us" as universal feminists, in opposition to a masculine and monolithic "them".

In this instance my (intellectual/political) shift, from apparently known or knowable quantity as the tutor and (therefore), the "authority figure" in the institution, to an unfamiliar/unquantifiable other cultural, political and intellectual domain served to alienate and/or frustrate the more articulate and confident feminists in the group.

This reaction led me to question, as I often do in the context of academe, how I as a black woman in an all-white institutional context offer myself to be seen. Busia attempts a similar analysis in terms of African and European dress. As a Ghanaian poet

who writes and performs her poems in Twi,[34] she describes the moment when she was invited to give a poetry reading at the "annual African Literature Association Conference" (206). What she had failed to consider, until the last moment, was that "I simply could not go and read my poems wearing a European cocktail dress. This conviction came upon me, and it was a deep inner refusal. The imperative of the situation made me *register* but not stop to interrogate the impulse. I went `ethnic'." (206)

For Busia, dress is important because of what she terms "dual focus" (207). With dress, she is able to "make you see my African-ness," (207) and at the same time it allows her to determine her own self-image, "in terms of ... tradition of adornment and other indices of social being" (207). In the light of Busia's use of African dress as a specifically African cultural sign, it is possible to ask not only *how* the on-looker views the Other in non-European dress, and what social interactions arise or are submerged, but also how the on-looker perceives the Other who chooses *not* to wear native-African dress. Acknowledging the fact that I *image* myself differently in various social and institutional contexts, I then questioned to what degree the presence of *this* Coloured body, that attempts to shift and defy being homologised into a mainstream white institutional culture, actually succeeds in representing herself as different? Thirdly, to what degree, if at all, is that difference really tolerated within the institution? Finally, is there not a danger, in the outsider-within strategies, of mis(re)presenting myself or giving conflicting signs to-be-seen so that it becomes possible for students (or staff) to forget my *blackness*? If this does occur, with what do they replace the blackness? According to Roy "[t]he absence of Black students, Black staff and a failure to incorporate Black writing on core courses is not only detrimental to the Black community; it narrows and restricts the experiences of white students and staff" (50).

This fact was brought to sharp focus in my first year[35] as a full-time lecturer. When I explained to a group that their references to "we" as being basically white, middle class with similar backgrounds did not include me, since I was a black (British) Nigerian, I became aware of the fact that, despite being black, offering myself to be seen as an academic with no other obvious and/or outward signs of identification with black cultures seemed to result in my blackness being over-looked. Subsequently, verbally identifying with aspects of black culture resulted in the group becoming uncertain of how to *identify* with me.[36] Was I not, then, by complying with institutional

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34 *Twi*, Busia explains, is her father's language "from the Brong-Ahafo region about one hundred miles north and west of the ancient imperial city of Kumasi" (210).

35 This appointment was with the Workshop Theatre, University of Leeds, September 1992-August 1994. Here I was recruited to be year tutor to students who spend one year in residence at the Workshop Theatre as part of their BA(QTS - Qualified Teacher Status) degree. The examples that I draw on hereafter are with this group of students unless otherwise specified.

36 This is a complex situation and one that leads to complex readings of institutional situations where there are all white students and staff. Hill Collins cites a situation in which the daughter of

codes of (white) conduct, inadvertently allowing myself to become deracinated. After all, as Omolade points out "[I am] competing in the white man's world and must prove [myself] to him ... get the job on the faculty ... receive a book contract ... " (287).

Despite the endless problematic internal monologues that seem to accompany being the only British-born black theatre academic in the country,[37] it is possible to *strategize*.[38] I have found that it is possible to strategize and challenge racist and sexist assumptions by refusing to be what Hill Collins describes as a "safe-outsider" (204). Safe-outsiders within the academy become trapped in institutional mechanisms that legitimise the process of racist and sexist practices. Thus Hill Collins argues: "one way of excluding the majority of Black women from the knowledge validation process is to permit a few black women to acquire positions of authority in institutions that legitimate knowledge, and to encourage us to work within the taken-for-granted assumptions of Black female inferiority shared by the scholarly community and the culture at large" (204).[39]

It is possible, however, to begin by questioning or unsettling the "taken for granted" and "legitimate knowledge" that students come to university with. Thus a

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an African-American sporting personality, Karen Russell, describes the problems of not being perceived as black by her friends. It is a familiar narrative, one in which the white person thinks that telling the black person they are never aware of their blackness is offered as a mark of sincere friendship, a compliment. What this effectively means is that blackness is perceived as a negative sign, except in those instances where the black person has been *availed* of their blackness by *the compliment*. Kathy Russell asks "How am I supposed to react to well-meaning, good, liberal white people who say things like :"You know Karen, I don't understand what all the fuss is about. You're one of my best friends, and I never think of you as black. Implicit in such a remark is, "I think of you as white", or perhaps just, "I don't think of your race at all" Hill Collins argues that by claiming that Ms Russell is not really "black", her friends unintentionally validate the system of racial meanings and encourage her to internalize those images". (79). At the opposing end of this is another view which might suggest that *colour blindness* surely does away with the view that one is a token black, and supports the fact that the black academic was chosen on the basis of merit (it also indicates that equal opportunities are being implemented). In this instance, however, I would argue that colour blindness results in blacks being denuded of black cultural differences and this could also result in the internalisation of white projected images of blackness.

37 I say this with more than a touch of humour. There are two other black theatre academics in Britain. Dr Jumai Ewu at Nene College, who teaches African Theatre in the Department of Drama, and Dr. Awam Ampka, at King Alfreds College in Winchester, who also teaches African Theatre. Both scholars are Nigerian

38 Given the context, "negotiate" might be a more fitting word to employ in this instance. Strategy sounds too devious, but I use the word nevertheless.

39 I am indebted to colleagues at the Workshop Theatre who encouraged me to teach on a broad range of theoretical and practical courses, from non-European theatre practices to Renaissance theatre. I was also invited to establish an MA option in any area of dramatic practice of my choosing - which led to my devising "Feminisms in the Theatre", a twelve week course. My arguments here are not intended to form the basis of a critique of the Workshop Theatre or its internal policies. Rather I am observing and analysing the ways in which theatre studies students seem to enter into the institution of higher education with a limited knowledge and/or awareness of cultural differences. The Workshop Theatre under the directorship of Martin Banham has a well established African Theatre course including an extremely well referenced African Studies library. The MA in theatre studies attracts a fair number of international students - especially from Africa. (Wole Soyinka, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 was an MA student at the Workshop Theatre)

course on American theatre in the twentieth century could begin by questioning the very category as I have attempted to do in Chapter Two, so that students are not taking as given the fact that the most significant contributors to American theatre and therefore aspects of American (theatre) history have all been white men. Additionally, as opposed to studying black theatre, (the title alone presumes that black is an homogenous category and therefore all black theatre practice, whether by black British or African-American, writers and performers goes under this title), it might be more illuminating to question what black theatre means and/or signifies as a title; and to ask who facilitates the meaning and in response to what. Courses that examine the techniques of the great Shakespearean actors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might also expand to examine Ira Aldridge's contribution as well as Kean's. Similarly it might be interesting to examine why for , for so long, white actors have blacked-up to play Othello when, in 1847, Aldridge was invited by Kean to play Othello, to Kean's Iago.[40] Not only does this give rise to an ironic smile in any seminar, it also raises the issue of mixed-race casting in a contemporary theatre context as well.

Rather than offering the American dream as a precursor of latter day tragedy, resulting in an examination of Arthur Miller's classic modern tragedy Death of A Salesman (1949), or Albee's Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf (1962), it would be equally as interesting to interrogate the American dream in order to ask: for whom is the myth of the American dream constructed? Furthermore, it might be interesting to examine the dream as understood by Martin Luther King Jr., Hansberry's A Raisin In The Sun might stimulate a discussion on the African-American dream of returning to the African homeland and what that signified for some African-American given the mainstream context of white hegemony.

Theatre courses which examine early twentieth-century women's plays could, as a matter of course, as opposed to tokenism, examine the ways in which currently anthologised plays by African-American writing pre-1950 were an attempt to highlight the injustices of white hegemonic rule. It would be fascinating in this instance to examine not only the similarities but the central formal and thematic differences between plays anthologised in Michelene Wandor's Strike While The Iron's Hot (1980) and Perkins' Black Female Playwrights. These are just a few examples, but they would also necessitate the development of other cultural and historical connections, so that the students and (staff) might engage in a process of learning that entails the "insiders" venturing *without*.

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40 J W Johnson notes that Kean saw Aldridge's performance of Othello in Covent Garden, London, April 10 1833. "[T]he result was Kean's Iago to Aldridge's Othello, and an intimate friendship between the two men". In his role as Aaron, the moor in Titus Andronicus, "he restored to the English stage a play, which prior to 1851, had not been acted for two centuries." (85)

I have found this comparative approach engaging (although problematic in other ways) as an approach with students who, from an early stage in the academic year, have become accustomed to hearing, for example, what Malcolm X thought about the American Dream as well as what George Steiner (1961) wrote on the same subject.[41] It makes the reading of dramatic texts much less a complacent activity.

In this context, the peculiar angle of vision that Hill Collins maintains characterises the outsider-within stance might be harnessed to question the assumption of students as to where I am standing. Pointing out that their use of "we" in any generalised way excludes me in very specific ways is not intended to induce guilt.[42] It does however curtail the practice of viewing me and, hopefully, other black women they might encounter in a similar context as honorary white academics, simply because we might choose not to exhibit the "manifold traditions of dress in a West African " sense (Busia 207).

Barbara Omolade questions why it is that black American institutions of higher education have failed to produce "significant Black women griot-historians- scholar-warrior-women who could liberate Black people and defend and produce Black intellectual and cultural traditions?" (287). Audre Lorde on the other hand in "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action" (40) claims to be *that* "Black woman warrior poet doing my work". Her particular question, "are you doing yours?" (42), leads me back to Jill Davis' query *vis-à-vis* the outsider-within stated at the beginning of the chapter. In response to Davis, I would argue that it is perhaps inevitable, though not in all cases particularly desirable, that black women working within the academic environment are going to view themselves as outsiders-within, by virtue of their being in an indisputable minority. In order to counter the weight of institutional and white hegemonic discourses and cultural forms of production and in the light of the complex situations cited here, it is often more desirable not to be where the obvious forms of power reside. The "work" that Lorde writes of cannot be conducted effectively from a position, which to quote Phelan, is "marked".

As a black woman I would argue that defining one's own stance from which to *do battle* or work, is more empowering than having that stance and the nature of the

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41 George Steiner's The Death of Tragedy (London: Faber and Faber, 1961) is a contemporary exposition on the non-applicability of tragedy, in the Aristotelian sense, to a contemporary audience/reader.

42 Like Gina Wisker's students who read Beloved for the first time, I found with this group of students that the "[e]njoyment of the text was itself felt to be something of a guilty activity because of the 'close to unbearable' content". (12) However this was debated very early on and I *sensed* that, as a black woman, they acknowledged that I was *giving them permission* to engage with the thematic and historical content of, for example aspects, of African-American history, without them having to censor their responses. The fact that there were no students of colour in the group obviously made it easier for them to discuss freely, although they perhaps would not have realised this.

work pre-defined within a fixed agenda. This is not to suggest that the outsider-within as stance/practice is unproblematic. It is, I think, inevitably problematic. Shifts and processes that I make as a black woman within mainstream white male-dominated institutions inevitably result in certain choices and decisions being made at the expense of others. However, as hooks points out it is the *absence of choices* that result in oppression. (From Margin to Center 5). Making choices and opting to strategize within academe is therefore expressing self-empowerment, even if that means re-positioning the black self as an (already) outsider, "outside" again, as Shange's Coloured women do in order to militate against specificity. I quoted Hill Collins earlier as viewing the outsider-within position as a "tremendous source of strength" and, I might add, pleasure particularly when white students who have a limited knowledge of blackness as a cultural and political sign can begin to debate (without the trappings of guilt), issues that contemporary black feminist academics in predominantly white institutions are also attempting to articulate:

> Just think, it wasn't until the 1920s that the emancipation of women began (and today is still trying to happen). So just imagine if you can what it must have been like to be a female and black! I'm afraid it's beyond my comprehension.[43]

III

> The Black woman scholar faces the index of facts and references as she sits down to write, and the voices of the academy come to haunt: 'Bad history are those set of assertions which cannot be verified with primary sources'. 'Your language is to subjective'. 'Quote from authorized sources!' 'Demonstrate how this is significant to the entire society not just Black people'. 'Don't be a generalist!' 'Your work is too rhetorical too lyrical'. She sits immobilized caught between those voices and the voices of her mothers and fathers. Her writing becomes paralyzed and stunted, stillborn within her psyche. (Omolade 290)

Black feminist scholars often refer to the *multilingual* nature of black women's lives alongside the contradictory nature of black women's existence in a liberal humanist and/or white mainstream culture. Omolade for example describes the way that black women "become multilingual" (209) by learning to speak "Europeanese", which she perceives is the oppressor's language. She also argues that the black female academic (she refers specifically to the historian) in the West is not "merely a contradiction in terms, but an ontological impossibility" (286). This is not dissimilar to Shange's notion of the Coloured woman's metaphysical dilemma. Furthermore, Omolade argues that black women scholars working in the context of the academy are

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43 Partial response to an examination question in which the students were required to analyse and discuss any one of three academic essays. This candidate had chosen to write on Edward G Smith's essay "Black Theatre".

ever in danger of having their history, their language and their intellectual sensibilities colonised and distorted by an institution that is "obsessed with rational thought"(285).

In her essay on black women writers (1992),[44] Mae Henderson offers a post-structuralist assessment of black women and black cultural production within a predominantly white mainstream culture. According to Henderson "black women must speak in a plurality of voices as well as in a multiplicity of discourses." This discursive diversity, or simultaneity of discourse, [she calls] 'speaking in tongues'....Significantly glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is a practice associated with black women in the Pentecostal Holiness Church." (149) Aligning speaking in tongues to Kristeva's polymorphously perverse/pre-oedipal child, she argues that the black woman (writer) is ever in the position of having to speak and/or write from a position of complex subjectivity. This results in

> black women writers enter[ing] into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter in to a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women....It is the complexity of these simultaneously homogenous and heterogeneous social and discursive domains out of which black women write and construct themselves ... that enables black women writers authoritatively to speak and engage both hegemonic and ambiguously (non)hegemonic discourse. (148)

To repeatedly encounter writing by black female scholars that speaks to the dilemma, contradiction, multiple jeopardy, fragmented reality and so on of black women is to remember that such terms continue to resonate with negative connotations when employed within liberal-humanist discourse, despite the fact that feminists such as Hill Collins describe the positive and empowering aspects of black female reality. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which seeing myself repeatedly described by a language that stresses what I am not as opposed to what I am becomes depressingly repetitive. Consequently I have become much more interested in examining the ways in which black women (in the context of the thesis as a whole, African-American women) not only describe, but seek to develop, ways of being which both challenge the perceived white and masculinist norms while at the same time evolving radical possibilities for a subjective self. Busia describes the way in which her various identifications as scholar, poet, Ghanaian[45] inevitably give rise to boundaries that coexist, "boundaries within which I must exist or which I have to cross every waking moment." (209) These boundaries also require constant negotiation, not just within the self, but in institutional and social contexts, and I would suggest that it is at the interface of the boundaries that the most radical and challenging constructions of black

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44 Mae G Henderson, "In Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition", in Feminists Theorize The Political 144-166.

45 She lists manifold origins and identities, see 204 and 209.

female subjectivity and feminist thought might appear, precisely because the boundaries are the regions which might at least be viewed as that place where distinctions are blurred, and where contradictory impulses are aligned. Of course this might be viewed as nothing more than a playful abstraction, a need to concretise an imaginative space in order to give it intellectual credence I do not think that this is a problem. What would be more problematic would be the denial of such a space, the abject refusal of the boundaries as a space in which critical and creative impulses transgress ideological limitations.

Busia recognises this need to militate against unification of selves or identities, and argues for a performance of "hybridities" as a form. She believes that "[i]t is possible not only to write but be an alternate text. The evidence of hybrid or translatable selves is textual and performative, not lack but plenitude. We are not caught athwart frames, we are shifting frames." (213)

"DEVISING THE PROCESS" - THE MAGDALENA PROJECT

20th-27th FEBRUARY 1989

BY NIKÉ IMORU

Niké Imoru is a twenty three year old post-graduate student. At present she is doing a research degree at Warwick University. The research is her attempt to locate and define a possible "feminine language" (as described by Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva) in theatre practices, particularly directing and writing. She has already attempted to examine on a practical level the concepts of a "feminine language", for which she collaborated with three other women to devise and perform original material.

She has directed a number of productions and acted as stage manager and assistant director for others. More recently she has lectured in drama at Loughborough University.

"Devising The Process" is her first document for the Magdalena Project.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Project

The Magdalena Project is an international network, dedicated to investigating the work of women in contemporary theatre. I was present at the fifth Magdalena event to be held at the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, between 20th and 27th February 1989.

The project as such is based at the arts centre, and has a strong international network which has hosted various events throughout Europe. Jill Greenhalgh, director of Magdalena is responsible for organising various physical, vocal, and performance workshops - many months in advance - and also inviting leading women theatre practitioners from around Europe to lead them. The workshops are generally open to women (and men) interested in the issues, practices and problematics involved with women in theatre.

The Magdalena Project's base administration is funded by the Welsh Arts Council. This covers the cost for administration and publicity.

Structure of the Conference

Entitled: "Process - The Devising of Original Material", the purpose of the week was firstly, to create work and secondly, to share the techniques of that creation. The five workshops on offer to seventy-five participants were led by five women theatre practitioners, each specialising in different aspects of theatre practice. Although each workshop focussed specifically on certain areas of theatre and theatre in the making, *all* were concerned with the *process* of creativity, with *devising* the *process* and in the wider context of the Magdalena Project, with how that process might be linked directly to discovering and/or defining a women's language in theatre.

"Devising The Process" was the first attempt to consciously involve younger women in the Magdalena Project. When asked what she meant by *younger* women, director Jill Greenhalgh maintained that by younger women she had not necessarily meant *young* in years, but rather she used young to mean those women who were just coming into theatre.

The workshops commenced at 10.00 a.m. each morning in different rooms in and around the arts centre, and at 4.30 p.m. each day, one of the workshops presented aspects of their work, for the other participants to see.

When I arrived at lunch time on day 3 (Wednesday) the workshops were already well underway. Lunch breaks, tea breaks, coffee breaks, were all taken in the open canteen area. Wherever one sat, one could see food or drink on display. Anything from a brief chat to an intense discussion was probably held there (or in the bar!). Always it seems that the presence of food and drink allows for a harmonious and communicable social setting. The presence of eighty or more women convening in one area at regular intervals during the course of the day, eating, drinking, talking, was a very distinct feature, described by a non-participant (of the Magdalena Project) as:

> Visually, so amazing and so intense ... to see so many women talking - especially when you don't know what they're talking about.

The evenings of the Magdalena Project were taken up with performances in the theatre, or more informal socialising in the bar, or both! Performances were given by Ida Kelarova singing a series of songs from the Eastern European Gypsy culture, Annie Griffin presented her solo show "Almost Persuaded" and Bobby Baker was invited by the project to perform her piece: "Drawing on a Mother's Experience". All the shows were open to the public.

The week culminated in a performance/presentation by each of the groups, (Sunday morning) this included a joint improvisation piece by the vocal group and two physical/movement groups.

An open forum discussion was the last time everybody was together. It was chaired by Gilly Adams and it gave workshop leaders and participants a chance to discuss any aspect of the week.

The Participants

Seventy-three women and two men attended the workshops.

Although it was aimed at *younger* women, there were slightly more *older* women present. Not all the young women were beginning to venture into theatre as practitioners. Some were studying at various colleges/universities, and *not* always English and/or drama either. One *young* woman was doing an engineering degree at Warwick University. Another had completed her degree and was employed as a civil servant. The younger women, early-mid twenties, generally had a limited experience

of professional theatre and were looking to make in-roads into the profession, now, or in the near future. Many had performance experience of some kind in small "unestablished" companies, universities/colleges or fringe theatre festivals. For most of the women, it was their first time at a Magdalena conference.

By comparison, the older women, including the workshop leaders tended to be theatre practitioners, administrators, teachers/lecturers. That said, one couldn't generalise. Some were working mothers, others were students. There was a feeling however that the difference between the younger and the older women was practical experience of the professional theatre. This was emphasised by the fact that over the course of the week, it became clear that the two sets of women came to the conference with different expectations of the Magdalena project. (This will become clearer as I go on).

The two men were both students. One studying fine-art, the other performance art. They worked in the same workshop, "The Performer in Performance Art".

There were participants from as far afield as Canada, but for the most part, they were European. Thus, aside from differences in age and experience it was a largely homogenous group.

My Role

It was difficult initially to decide how to approach the documenting. It was also my first time at a Magdalena Conference. However, my own research which is an attempt to locate a feminine discourse in (women's) theatre practice made this Magdalena meeting more than an event to be documented. I was curious and interested as to what would surface and what would be foregrounded.

Initially, I was not sure whether to adopt the position of "outside eye", or indeed whether to somehow inscribe myself into the process of documenting. Eventually, I decided to somehow use both approaches, by adopting the point of view of a young *and* black woman.

By the same token I am not at any point looking to present an absolute truth or a set of truths. Neither can I recall or relate *everything* that went on, firstly because I could not attend five workshops at once, or even five workshops in one day if I wanted to make careful and detailed observations. Secondly, it needs to be remembered that even my own position as "passive" (as opposed to participant) observer cannot be totally objective. Thus my documenting is about what I could see, what I could hear and what I was told.

CHAPTER 2

THE WORKSHOPS AND THE LEADERS

The five workshops on offer to the participants were led by women theatre practitioners with radically different approaches to their practice and process.

Presence

Geddy Aniksdal, Norwegian actress, director and member of the Grenland Friteater in Norway asked the participants in her group to come prepared with a learnt text. She wanted to examine the process of creativity through dynamic physical improvisation. Geddy explained to me that the exercises, both physical and vocal were themselves processes to bring the participants "out on the other side" ready to be creative. The exercises then were part of the process enabling the participants to engage/interact in a creative way. She encouraged a process which forced the performer to disengage with preconceived ideas of *how* to create dynamic physical work. Thus her workshop was about working *with* contradictions. For example, each participant worked on their text, vocally and then attempted to find contradictory as opposed to complimentary physical movements.

This working against the grain of expectation was further explored on a one-to-one tutorial basis during the week. These had been arranged to "understand *their* intentions", Geddy explained.

This workshop was very self-exploratory. Brief guide-lines were offered, as opposed to strict instruction/direction. She advised participants to:

> "put any feeling you like into work as long as I can see what you are doing".

The Performer in Performance Art

The workshop which focussed on shifting visual art to performance art and/or performance was led by Gerd Christiansen, a Danish scenic designer, actress and sculptor. Gerd's group worked in a studio space resembling an art-studio and a black box.

This work differed from the others, insofar as they had little to do with group dynamics. They focussed instead on the relationship between *the self* and the space, and examined the conception of an idea and how that idea might be practically realised. They performed basic exercises (Gerd explained that only the basic concepts could be grasped in such a short time) which related to sensations and emotions, before embarking on the making of fantastically absurd and exaggerated costumes, or technical (lighting) work. The Magdalena technician - Trisha was on hand to explain the different effects of various lighting techniques and participants were free to experiment for themselves. This freedom to explore characterised the workshop, probably due to the fact that much time was taken up with designing costumes and working in small groups/couples towards the final day presentation.

Making a Show

Annie Griffin, American actress, used games, improvisation and choreography to build a performance based on specific themes raised in Paula Rego paintings.

Play, games, pleasure, "the pleasure of recognition" were all stipulated in this workshop. The group attempted to deal with social taboos, but particularly those affecting *girls* in the *family*. Exercises (improvisation) which started as games led to bizarre and frequently comic scenarios, which were later pieced together for the presentation. Ritualistic clapping lent group solidarity to each participant's scene, positive energy and posture were encouraged (by Annie) to accompany each act/improvisation. Much of the choreography had rhythm, and/or gesture imposed upon it calling for strong group and individual focus. Annie's own solo show "Almost Persuaded", which she performed on the Saturday night, the workshop, and the group's final presentation all gave the appearance of being "innocent" and fun. In reality the issues being raised, the forms used, Brechtian-cum-Cabaret resulted in a satirical theatre with a dangerously subversive edge to it.

Vocal Scenes

The vocal group worked with singer and songwriter Ida Kelarova, to extend vocal skills. Ida is a descendant of the Eastern European Gypsy culture, and their tradition of singing, (a tradition only followed by women) was used in the workshops. Again, participants were invited to bring their own material - written or instrumental. She frequently told the participants:

> If you get the emotion you want to find, that's your support ... it has to come,

and indeed the workshops were based on techniques which enabled the women to "unblock tangled emotions". The workshop was *not* about aiming for "technically good voices", but rather for a collective vocal power.

The exercise that gained recognition (and demonstrated by Ida and participants during the week) involved, breathing in deeply from the pit of the stomach for a good 15-20 seconds, while raising the forearm to the chest. Then, forcing out the air in a powerful gust, while simultaneously pushing the lower arm down. It was maintained that this exercise gave the women the confidence to sing expressively and powerfully. The thrust behind the voices was the emotions, which were shamelessly surfaced and foregrounded in order to arrive at a point, vocally, that was not simply aesthetically pleasing in the conventional sense of singing, but intensely moving.

Part of Ida's technique was to give the group a Gypsy song, without translating it for them, so that they could invest the song with any given emotion, vocally. During the final day presentation, Ida invited spectators to choose an emotion they would like to hear sung. Anger was chosen, and the group demonstrated their ability to sing the same song, invested with a different emotion. Ida stressed two points about her skill and technique. Firstly, that:

> Everything is hidden behind the voice, and it is magical;

and secondly, the fact that her approach

> ... is not pedagogical - instead I slowly and naturally allow them to let go.

The Logic of Passion

The fifth workshop was led by a Polish actress and teacher with the Ingmar Linds institute in Italy, Magdalena Pietruska. The second physical workshop, it used technical principles for the development of personal themes. For most of the week this workshop had a very rigid structure. Magdalena would talk her way through the exercises while demonstrating, then, she would talk the group through the exercise and finally she would break down the exercise to explain the reasoning and logic behind each of the movements. Often she would use vocal sound effects to guide them through, thus accentuating/increasing the motorisation/mechanisation of the movements. The vocal effects appeared to be the catalyst for the physical movements.

In this workshop, there was essentially one voice putting the group through a series of highly controlled, technical and stylised movements, based on classical mime. Magdalena explained that her own work and the workshop's are about translating or representing life through stylised movement and sound. The translation

is not meant to be a photographic representation, or realistic in any sense. Instead, it should be the *equipment*, but through the use of physical and/or vocal dynamics.

Repetition, repetition with variation, minimalisation, concentration and musical themes were the dominant characteristics of this workshop.

> Limitation is not such a bad thing, Magdalena explained. It's simply a case of taking concentration, energy, fantasy and using it in a focused way. I don't have to jump from flower to flower to be interesting.

She maintained that repetition can be pushed to such limits that it becomes abstract and eventually comic in a bizarre sort of way.

The group eventually moved away from repetition and limitation exercises to the other extreme in an attempt to create a *super energy*, the type of energy that comes spontaneously from slipping on a banana skin, the perfect fall, the perfect moment of explosion, the perfect catching of one's own body. With the aid of rock music, they were asked to literally throw themselves into the space, without technique and without thought. To (for the moment), totally disregard all they had learnt over the week.

Although all the workshops were seeking to *devise a process*, they varied greatly in terms of: firstly, where they were starting from physically/vocally/emotionally. Secondly, the areas/themes/issues to be explored. Thirdly, the process(es) they were engaging with and finally the rhythms/tempo of each group based on how participants interacted collectively, with the group leader, and with the work in progress.

In the next section, I will attempt to explain *how I* saw the various workshops operating.

CHAPTER 3

HOW I SAW THE WORKSHOPS OPERATING

I was surprised that by the third day (the day I arrived), there was already a relaxedness and cohesion that one usually witnesses towards the end of a workshop week.

I started by listening to Ida's vocal workshop. They were singing a Czechoslovakian song. Two things struck me immediately, firstly, the fact that I had *never* heard women sing in this way before, full of power and anger (?). At the same time it was a very sensual and raw sound that was being produced, a vocal sensuality borne of confidence and strength as opposed to a typically feminine voice with the emphasis on gentleness and meekness. Secondly, the confidence with which they sang as a collective voice was also striking.

Ida was at the piano, the group in a line opposite her. She would allow them to sing to the end of the song and then offer advice, or instruction as needed. The women would also offer suggestions or opinions on how they felt. It was very focussed but surprisingly relaxed. I felt sure that the women had not come to the workshop with these "new voices" and toyed with the idea that she had somehow located a *new vocal range*. I was prepared to stay much longer, until Ida suggested each woman sing a solo. I left quickly my first thought being that I was not familiar enough yet for the group to "pretend I was not there".

Since I was free to wander from group to group, I sat and watched Annie Griffin's performance workshop. This group were much younger in comparison to the vocal group. Annie was leading the group through exercises and improvisation games. One of the games involved remembering four or five things that were forbidden "in your household when you were younger".

As each woman told the group what they were forbidden to do, the game appeared to take on an impetus of its own and become almost "confessional", but in a very bizarre and comic way. Some of the "forbidden acts" took on a tongue-in-cheek "Dear Agony Aunt" approach, without being apologetic or pathetic. At the same time, there was no sense of "spilling out" emotionally. They hadn't been invited to "confess", but to recount. Here again was a conscious self assertiveness and

assuredness. Anything extra which seemed to happen, for example, the comicness of the "forbidden acts" was retained and used for the final presentation.

I asked Annie exactly what her role was and how she *directed* the workshops. She explained that she was the *composition* maker. She introduced games and exercises and the participants would work on extending them, in some way, while she "added bits", or "took bits out". For example she "tidied up" the finished piece, pictorially, made suggestions to increase volume, or cut the parts that didn't work. "Rather like a painter", she added "putting an extra touch of red here, or a little blue there".

I moved from the collective based workshops to the more instructive workshop of Magdalena Pietruska. They were in the middle of an exercise when I arrived. One moment it looked like bio-mechanics, the next ballet, then classical mime. Magdalena was talking and demonstrating her way through the small scenery; a *young lady* drops her handkerchief, the *gallant* young man picks it up. Then she proceeded to retrieve the imaginary handkerchief in more than a dozen stylised and graceful moves. She used words and appropriate vocal effects simultaneously to demonstrate the moves. Once she had gone through the various stages of explaining and demonstrating, the group attempted to master the moves in their own space and time. Twenty to thirty minutes later, once Magdalena felt that they had experimented enough with the stylised retrieval of the handkerchief, they were grouped together and asked to repeat the exercise in their own time with their own rhythms. Later, vocal effects were added by a singer in the group.

Interestingly, although they had all learnt to do the same exercises as individuals, once in a group, the performers began to take on gestures of their own. Thus, despite the fact that they all started with the same expressions and gestures, what emerged was *their own use* of that technique to create their own style *without* deviating from the basic exercise set - Clearly this type of physical expression is a language (mode of communication in itself). Similarly, the vocal effects performed by a singer in the group were a translation of the movement. I concluded that if the physical dynamic is one language and the vocal dynamic another, then it *is* possible for one person to engage in both at the same time, since they are spoken with different organs. This would result in a *polysemic* dialogue. This idea of *polysemy* is something espoused by the French feminists, particularly Hélène Cixous. She advocates multiplicity and plurality and sees it as something specifically "feminine", as opposed to a rather more holistic attitude associated with the linear and the masculine.

At four-thirty all the participants and workshop leaders convened in the theatre to watch the work in progress of Geddy's dynamic physical improvisation group.

Geddy's initial assertion that as an audience we were not welcome, since this would affect the nature of the work, was understandable.

> We have to find a way not to be disturbed by your presence. You are not watching a performance that will be funny or sad, but work in progress.

However I felt that this made the relationship between myself (as spectator) and the "performers" problematic, because my role as spectator had effectively been disrupted. Thus, I felt my "gaze" to be voyeuristic. Similarly, the "performers" must *necessarily* have been conscious of a half filled auditorium and this would have affected their work. That said, I took the point that we were not there to be entertained.

I witnessed a variety of unself conscious *physical contortions* by the group and felt that they were attempting to develop a kinaesthetic awareness. Here was the exact opposite of Magdalena's workshop where precision and minimalisation were pre-requisites. Instead the group were reaching for every point in the space. It was not balletic or *refined* in any way (always it seems easier to say what the work is *not* as opposed to what it specifically *is*), it was more a physical theatre. From individual work of exploring space they moved to working in couples. Visually, this was striking in terms of the gestures that emerged: confrontational, seductive, aggressive, occasionally creating a 'homo-erotic' visual imagery.

When told to combine vocal and physical, there was a definite (involuntary) shift to the back of the space, and it was left to Geddy to whirl around the group insisting that they "use the whole room". Clearly the vocal effects had not been fully developed at this stage.

I was never too sure what was happening in this anarchic spectacle. There was no apparent structure and Geddy's minimal instructions were spoken quietly to each participant as necessary. Intermittently I was reminded of Peter Brooks' *Marat/Sade*, (where the inmates of the asylum perform the persecution of the Marquis de Sade).

For the final exercise, the women were asked to cross the stage (one at a time) diagonally combining gestures and sounds/texts they had worked on in the day.

By the end of the first day I had seen four of the workshops. In retrospect it is easy to see why I had been overawed by what I saw. It was after all a unique situation. Seventy-five participants, all but two of whom were women, devising different processes in vocal physical performance and performance art workshops. It was very much a "utopian" image I was witnessing. Already the whole event seemed like *a way of life*. From what I had *seen* in the workshops, the participants as a collective were enjoying the respective processes of creativity and learning. They *appeared* to be moving in the same direction.

I continued to move from workshop to workshop and slowly began to see themes, and ideas being developed. Increasingly the group's focus began to shift to the end of the week for the final day presentations, although this did not detract from the actual projects. By the time I reached Gerd's group, many of the costumes were near completion. They had been made out of white fabric stiffener. One resembled a ballgown and although it *hung* on its owner, it was (intentionally) many sizes too big. It looked as if it had been chiselled out of marble, and was scrunched up for added *sculptured* effect. Then different coloured lights (using red, blue, yellow gels) were shone onto the dress. Slowly and gently, but with feet firmly planted, she negotiated her way in and out of the various colours, so that the coloured lighting effects were visible on her costume. The effect was hypnotic and therapeutic. Hypnotic because one was drawn to the spectrum of colours and the way the woman seems to glide in and out of the lights. It was gentle and lyrical. It seemed to work as therapy because one's mind focused so intently on the gentle spectacle. There was no other noise, aside from Gerd encouraging the woman to move more towards one light or another. Also the participant herself seemed engrossed and engulfed by the effect of the lights and her costume respectively.

I decided to call this "The Museum Of The Moving Image", feeling that the name was more appropriate to this workshop than that film museum on the South Bank in London.

Quite understandably, the group did not exhibit any of the "sculpted costumes" in their 4.30 presentation since this was being kept for the presentation at the end of the week. Instead they demonstrated, with the use of exercises, how they focus and concentrate before the day's workshop begins. One such exercise involved three people being blindfolded. Tied to each person's index finger was a piece of string pulled taut. The blind-folded party was led around the space and they had to decide where the string was in relation to the floor, by moving their finger (with the attached string) to the appropriate height.

There didn't *seem* to be *a* voice(s) in this workshop, instead, there was much contemplation. In this sense it was more reminiscent of an art studio.

In contrast to Gerd's restricted 4.30 presentation was Annie's performance workshop. By 6.00 p.m. the majority of the spectators had taken part in one or other of the games. Thus, what stared as a workshop of one group's work ended up as a group exercise for everybody in the room.

The exercises were simple and complex but both the spectators and the group worked in a focussed way to produce various rhythms and effects successfully. It was most energising. Tempo and concentration varied from game to game and even at this stage (day six - Friday) of the workshop week interaction with others was always being developed further. Annie's workshop which involved "performer" and "spectator" reinforced *social unity* and *group solidarity*. Repeatedly I heard Annie say of her group:

> It's great getting to know fifteen people, so quickly, so well.

As an observer of the workshops I was in a privileged position. I was able to make connections *across* workshops and anticipate the work for the final presentation. I felt that the final presentations on the Sunday were an accurate reflection of the week's work, in the sense that the groups were showing not only the result of devising their processes, but also in some cases, the *ways* in which they had arrived/collaborated to achieve that process.

The vocal group performed their various exercises, demonstrating their "new voices". One woman had written and composed a song for the group and this was also performed. Later on, the two physical workshops collaborated with the vocal group and based purely on improvisation (this was the first time they had come together to improvise) they produced a polysemic (vocal/physical) spectacle. They were joined by Ida playing the piano and singing.

The performance workshop had developed and extended their themes and presented a polished piece of subversive theatre. I called theirs "Edge Theatre", because it was so close to it. Scenes of little girls lifting their skirts up to their dogs was initially funny, then the spectator realises the full implication of the scene. Fifteen *girls* doing well executed ballet (arabesque) movements, singing "one and two and three and four", with sweet smiles plastered on their faces is ludicrous to watch. When one of the women looked directly at the audience and insisted "I really *don't* want to do this!", everyone laughed at her misfortune, but the social comment being made at a subliminal level was much more serious.

Gerd's performance art group performed a visually stunning piece of modernist theatre, using tableaux. The larger-than-life costumes engulfed the performers who moved slowly out of one tableaux and into another. Meanwhile, other performers on the set were *experiencing* sand and water, suspended from the rafters in plastic bags and punctured to allow the contents to pour out. Light was manipulated and danced to and fro. A blindfolded woman in red traced her way, with white chalk, along the black wall opposite the spectators, for the duration of the performance, while a man on hands and knees traced his hands and feet around the edges of the performing space with chalk. The effect was stunning. There was no single focus once the plastic bag of sand had been punctured by the two women standing face to face. Always my peripheral vision was fully operational. It was like being in an art studio and constantly spinning one's head in order to try and keep all the exhibits in view at once. Pictorially I thought the piece was faultless, incorporating the right combination of everything to create visually stunning photographs on stage.

Over the course of the week, I spent some time talking to individuals and groups of participants. I was interested in what they had expected from the week and whether these expectations had been realised/satisfied or not.

In the following section I shall examine these responses.

CHAPTER 4

PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES

There were mixed reactions to the workshops and the Magdalena project as a whole. In comparison to other Magdalena meetings of which I have only read and heard, the emotional intensity appears to have remained constant. Susan Bassnett in documenting previous Magdalena projects has spoken of the difficulty in attempting to define and articulate the feelings and emotions which seem to subliminally operate, but which are so powerfully foregrounded. Neither can it be said that these emotions are always constructive and/or positive. Often they are problematic. During the informal discussions outside the workshops, much of the true feelings of the participants came to light.

The fourth day of the workshops began charged with emotions. One could feel the tension and bristling emotions. The rumblings of discontent exploded at different points in the day - and they frequently exploded over the heads of one or other of the workshop leaders.

Two of the women who spoke to me had either left their workshop during the week or sat watching the group from the back. The former had been in the vocal workshop, the latter in Magdalena's physical workshop.

They felt that the workshop leaders were not dealing with the individual and individual needs; thus mentally and emotionally relegating some women to "the back of the class". One argument was that the workshops were *not* versatile enough and the exercises were associated with training "for Russian athletes". As a partially disabled woman, she believed that there was prejudice towards disabled women and a general lack of sympathy towards those unable to find their own way to translate the work in hand into something physically beneficial for themselves. Another woman, who worked in the performance workshop insisted that:

> it has been a week of benign manipulation. We've all been allowed to say things, but if they were against the grain, they were ignored.

The woman concerned who is an actress thought, from the publicity and advertising, that the work would be experimental. Thus, she concluded that the publicity/advertising for the event had been misleading (and for her workshop). The

actual workshop she felt was *not* to do with process, instead it focussed intently on the final day presentation and the "devising of a show" instead of a "process". This left little space to explore and experiment. She admitted to having made certain assumptions about a *women's* festival of this kind, and was surprised that the week lacked a feminist approach. She concluded that an overall political framework had been absent from the whole week.

Other women I spoke to also felt that the "Devising the Process" title had been misleading, insofar as they felt that the Magdalena project in the wider context of the movements as a whole was to do with locating a women's language, but thus far, the presence of women was purely incidental.

A pattern of differences began to emerge and crystallised some days later during another group discussion, in the bar. The discussion this time was less to do with specifics and individuals and more to do with the wider (political) concerns of the Magdalena project.

There was a reaction *against* the emotional thrust inherent in some of the workshops. Those women felt that they could not identify with the emotionally cathartic approach to devising theatre. Secondly, the point was raised that the under-representation of Afro-Caribbean and Asian women gave the week a very Eurocentric bias (this was also raised in the discussion at the end of the week), which meant that any attempts to devise a process or locate a *women's* language was being done so purely from a white European, middle-class, heterosexual position. Thirdly, that in reality, nothing/little would be found to be *different* or *new* with all women/mostly women devising a process, because the approach in at least two of the workshops was being replicated from "masters". These workshops were viewed as masterclasses, with an autocratic figure dominating as opposed to a collective.

Looking at the women involved in the discussion, I became consciously aware of the fact that these women I had spoken to earlier were in fact young women under twenty-five and I concluded from this that there was (what I temporarily termed) a "generation gap".

When confronted by the 2 women in the group who were dissatisfied with their workshops, Ida and Magdalena both said on separate occasions:

> I am not a therapist or a psychiatrist.

They stressed that it would be impossible to act as therapist to fifteen individuals in one week. Magdalena explained to her participant that as a partially disabled person, she was not unique and that she should try to find alternative ways for the exercises to work for *her*. Also, that "sitting and watching was not such a bad thing", since much can be learnt from observing. I asked Ida whether she felt the Magdalena project was not responsible for any repercussions which are a result of "unblocking tangled emotions" and exposing raw nerve endings leading to further emotional problematics. I felt that there was a risk element in such a process, especially knowing that there was only one week to complete the process. What happens if a woman cannot engage with the powerful/turbulent emotions within herself in the short space of time? Suppose participants start the process, but cannot complete it? Ida Kelarova is an impressively powerful woman. The conviction behind her statements leaves one in no doubt that she knows and is confident about what she is doing, but most importantly, about what the participants in her group were doing:

> It's all to do with trust and being responsible for yourself and your actions.

She explained that the relationship between herself and the participants was one of trust. If this was established, then there would be none of the problems I persisted in describing.

I spoke to Ida's group (there were a significant number of *older* women here) at the end of the week and asked them for their views on the actual workshop. To write everything they expressed would take too long, but below are some of the things they said.

Woman 1: Everyone has their own problems. Ida's skill and talent has brought out the best in us, without petting, without indulgence. She has allowed us to emerge. Good or bad it's me singing. I think I can go somewhere with that.

Woman 2: Assertiveness has been regained. There has been a strange combination of risk and safety. There has to be an element of power, of danger, and vulnerability.

Woman 3: I don't give a shit about what I look like when I sing because I am rooted and I am solid.

> Woman 4: When I first started singing my teacher used to say: your throat shouldn't hurt it's your legs that should hurt. This is the first time I've pulled a muscle in my leg - from singing!.

All the women spoke in celebration of the week, their workshop, but most importantly *themselves*. They felt that they had come a long way and many spoke of having found "their own voice". They talked of the process of *freeing*, as working through fear and also locating their own fears to overcome them.

Their development and progress said Ida, had been multi-layered, but she stressed the fact that the women had always been allowed to make mistakes in the week, there was no *right way*, or *wrong* way:

> "You have to believe in yourself," she urged "if you make a mistake, you make a mistake".

The discussion forum was the last item on the Magdalena time table for the week. It was chaired by Gilly Adams. She opened the discussion by inviting the younger women to speak first, since the project had been set up with them specifically in mind. Various young women who I had spoken to during the week began to express to the forum their feelings. Essentially, they were arguing that the week did not have the specifically female/feminist basis they had expected. Some felt that the fact that it was all women working together (bar two men), was incidental. Since, there had been no real attempt to examine and/or explore from a female/feminist perspective. They wanted feminist/womanist issues foregrounded much more strongly and expressed a need and wish to try and locate a female practice/language. The point was also raised that essentially, it had been "an easy atmosphere for women to work in".

Annie Griffin, silent until now, suggested that asking whether there was a women's language was a "dumb question".

> I think diversity and a wealth of confidence are what's important - and seeing other work: fancy restricting women's theatre to certain things. What's important are our differences. This group is too homogenous. There are no blacks or Asians, so making it incredibly safe. Seeing what we have in common is problematic because there aren't enough differences to start with.

A number of women agreed with the last statement adding disabled women to the list. Jill explained that information and publicity had been sent out to various minority groups and "women of colour", but there had been no response.

It was agreed that a newsletter would be a good idea to keep the women in touch with the Magdalena project and participants past and present. The general consensus was that people did not mind paying an annual subscription to help with the Magdalena funds and the newsletter.

The workshop leaders were asked if they would like to express anything or ask questions and Geddy asked participants what they felt they had learnt that was not purely emotional:

> Woman 1: Technicals which are usually marginalised, have been a great help to me.

> Woman 2: We learnt the values of the unknown ... to keep going and not be afraid of the unwelcome, the unknown.

Like all discussion forums, it became more heated as it went on. There was a disagreement between Annie and Magdalena about authority and the notion of *the master* and the *genius*. Magdalena attributes much of what she has learnt to Ingmar Linds, referring to him as "the master". Annie maintained that she found this disturbing. She disagreed with the notion of *the genius*, the *guru* and seeing directors as the people *with* ideas, while the performer has none. Magdalena argued from a European point of view and a more theoretical perspective regarding theatre, as opposed to theatre as craft. She argued that *anyone* who creates a movement *against* a present and established movement, will be "guru-ized".

> For example Grotowski; It is others, students, followers, who see Grotowski as a guru, not the man himself. We must not forget to acknowledge those from whose work we have taken.

Despite the chairwoman, the argument continued, until Ida assisted Gilly by saying:

> I am relieved to hear so many points of view. Each way of working is valid and has its place ...

The discussion ended here, and "Devising The Process" was over - apart from some rousing songs around the piano with Ida.

CHAPTER 5

MY RESPONSES

For the five days I spent documenting, there were more issues raised, more moments of inspiration and a multitude of discussions held, than would be possible to record in the space of this article.

Group solidarity and a sense of all embracing warmth and support were the prevalent features of the week, but I couldn't assume that a collective was always satisfied as a collective, because I had witnessed them collaborating in a unified way. By the same token, I could not assume that if a woman was crying bitterly because she couldn't face another workshop, that she wanted to leave. Both examples were perhaps part of the process of creativity.

Like the younger women, I too found myself "looking for something new", although I didn't know exactly what. I realised though that this was an essentialist approach to locating "otherness". The creative process after all does not take place in a vacuum. Wherever we go, we carry around with us sets of ideas ("invisible luggage"). Something new can only come with past influences and what has gone before. I wondered why or how the mutual feelings of solidarity and enthusiasm in the vocal group had remained so constant (although one woman did leave before the end of the week) in view of the feelings that had been expressed about some of the other workshops. It must be said that the *voice* has a very immediate impact. It is much easier to associate with the different emotional registers in a voice, than in a series of physical exercises or a piece of prose/a recitation. The idea that "music touches something in us all" came back to me repeatedly.

The main areas of contention, notably, those raised by the *younger* women throughout the week highlight the fact that there was a definite discrepancy between those who wanted to learn about theatrical practice and investigate the possibility of a *dramatique féminine*, and those who wanted to exchange experiences in a quasi-drama therapeutic way. This schism may in fact be typical of (nearly) all women's events, particularly where there is a fusion of the emotional and private with the professional/public.

The problematics raised by the *younger* women about the week might be a function of their limited experience of the theatre world, where egocentricity and chauvinism rule, but the fact remains they felt/saw a need to push right past those

existing obstacles very forcefully. Consequently, they appeared to be much more willing to embrace and encounter the issues/problematics of women in theatre head on, with their political and academic tools. In effect, they are seeking to create an identity for themselves and by implication a stronger profile in a *society* and an establishment that is less than tolerant of new and "unestablished" ideas. Their desire to take risks (in an era when risks are dangerous) and take from what has gone before if it can be seen to advance and enhance their work is an indication that rather than looking to confine *women's theatre* to a set of experiences related only to themselves, they are willing to embrace a multiplicity/plurality of approaches in *their* search for a possible/plausible "other" in *theatricality*.

In contrast to this, the *older* women, *generally* more experienced as practitioners, focused to a lesser extent on the problematics perhaps because firstly, they are not seeking to create an identity in theatre or at this stage of their lives. They have/are already facing the limitations imposed on them in their careers/lives by the *status quo*. They are less able to take the risks in the holistic way that the younger women can/do. Subsequently they are more able/prepared to engage with what the Magdalena project is offering, and is about. It becomes more than a learning/creative process, it becomes an emotional process as well. On the one hand a homogenous group can itself be therapeutic and reassuring to its members, but since the Magdalena project is an *international movement*, a continued absence of black and Asian women, for whatever reasons, will raise the same questions in the minds of participants.

(How) Can What happens within the Magdalena Project be related to what goes on in the theatre in general?

I ask *myself* this questions because no matter how beneficial the work of the project, it cannot exist in a vacuum. The point is surely to foreground the network and its activities. It was mentioned in the discussion forum that all the women would go away and tell a number of other people about the work they had done and their experiences of/with the Magdalena project. "Spreading the Magdalena word" is clearly one way for it to reach many more people, but it is not necessarily the most effective way. One of the women I spoke to during the week is a mainstream (RSC) actress. Perhaps the Magdalena Project will *infiltrate* the ranks of mainstream theatre. Perhaps not.

It is more a case of as many people as possible taking what the network is offering and putting those ideas into practice elsewhere. Perhaps this is an oversimplification, but I think not. There is after all a production being planned by some of the Magdalena practitioners - Midnight Level 6 - to go on tour in 1990. That said, the Magdalena is not looking for assimilation into the mainstream theatre, but I believe there can be a space for its work, it's practitioners, it's organisers alongside the present theatre culture.

If British theatre and its audiences were less resistant to experimental work, (aside from the already converted), the question at the start of this section would not arise. The Magdalena Project would simply co-exist and enrich the present theatre culture. Perhaps now too is the time for *other* Magdalena networks. *Not* factions from within the present network but *sister groups*, moving in the same direction but approaching aims from different perspectives.

Hypothetically speaking one can imagine a *Magdalena 2* collaborating with *Magdalena 1* for a country-wide tour or a repertory season of *Magdalena productions*. Yes!/Fantastic!! (Although, I do acknowledge the problems of funding.) Yet, a collaboration of this sort *did* occur on a *much* smaller scale, when three groups improvised on the final day. I overheard Geddy remark to Ida afterwards:

It doesn't matter (at this stage) that it was good or bad. What matters is that it *happened*."

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The presentation of this thesis is in accordance with the MLA Handbook For Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations, (3rd ed.).

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